

# The Poet's Essay.

## The Delicacy of Walt Whitman

— James Wright.

The public mask, the coarse Whitman, is false. Then what is true? Is there a private Whitman who is delicate, and if there is a delicate Whitman, what is his poetry like? Where can we find it? And what does it have to do with those of us who want to read it? Is Whitman's delicacy a power that is alive in American poetry at the present moment? If so, who is displaying it? And is it capable of growth?

The *delicacy* of Walt Whitman. I do not mean to imply that Whitman was delicate as Nietzsche, for example, was in delicate health. Whitman really does seem to have been a strong man, in spite of the public mask's strident insistence on his own vigor. His actions were often modest and yet they demonstrate a physical condition astonishingly robust. When the war began, Whitman was forty-two years old. He went into the war. He did not have to go. I am not concerned with arguing the ethical significance of his relation to the war. I point only to the fact. In an essay recently published in the *Sewanee Review*, Mr. James M. Cox eloquently describes Whitman's exploit in terms which reveal the abundant physical strength of the man:

Whitman's role in the Civil War stands as one of the triumphs of our culture. That this figure should have emerged from an almost illiterate background to become a national poet, that he

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From *The Presence of Walt Whitman*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962).

should have at the age of forty-two gone down into the wilderness of Virginia to walk across the bloody battlefields ministering to the sick and wounded, that he should have paced through the hospitals and kept a vigil over the mutilated victims on both sides, that he should have created the war in prose and poetry of an extraordinarily high order—that he should have done these deeds shows how truly he had cast himself in the heroic mould.

So the delicacy I have in mind is not an empty gentility, nor the physical frailty that sometimes slithers behind arrogance. It is the delicacy of his *poetry* that concerns me. It has its source in the character of Whitman himself, and it is, I believe, available to American poetry at the present time.

Whitman's poetry has delicacy of music, of diction, and of form. The word "delicacy" can do without a rhetorically formal definition; but I mean it to suggest powers of restraint, clarity, and wholeness, all of which taken together embody that deep spiritual inwardness, that fertile strength, which I take to be the most beautiful power of Whitman's poetry, and the most readily available to the poetry, and indeed the civilization, of our own moment in American history.

If what I say is true, then we are almost miraculously fortunate to have Whitman available to us. For some time the features of American poetry most in evidence have been very different from Whitman's: in short, recent American poetry has often been flaccid, obtuse and muddled, and fragmentary, crippled almost. Yet there is great talent alive in our country today, and if the spirit of Whitman can help to rescue that talent from the fate of so many things in America that begin nobly and end meanly, then we ought to study him as carefully as we can. What is his poetry like?

Let us consider first the delicacy of his music. And since I want to listen to the music closely, a few notes on traditional prosody are in order. At this point Whitman himself is ready to help us. As a stylist, he did not begin as a solitary barbarian (in Ortega's sense of that word). He is many things that are perhaps discomforting and even awkward, but he is not a smug fool—he is not an imitation Dead End Kid pretending that no

poet or man of any kind ever existed before he was born upon the earth. Whitman realizes that the past has existed.

He also understands how the past continues to exist: it exists in the present, and comes into living form only when some individual man is willing to challenge it. Whitman dares, like Nietzsche, to challenge not only what he dislikes but also what he *values*. "The power to destroy or remould," writes Whitman in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, "is freely used by him (the greatest poet) but never the power of attack. What is past is past. If he does not expose superior models and prove himself by every step he takes he is not what is wanted."

It seems to me of the gravest importance that Whitman's relation to established traditional forms of poetry and of society itself be clarified, so that we may free him from the tone of pretentious ignorance that has been associated with his mere name, from time to time, by fools. He knows that the past exists, and he knows that, as a poet and as a man, he has a right to live. His duty to the past is precisely this: to have the courage to live and to create his own poetry.

This is the great way of learning from the noble spirits of the past. And the most difficultly courageous way of asserting the shape and meaning of one's own poetry and one's own life is to challenge and surpass those very traditions and masters whom one can honestly respect. This deep spiritual kinship between a truly original man and the nobility of the past is formulated thus by Goethe: "People always talk of the study of the ancients; but what does that mean, except that it says, turn your attention to the real world, and try to express it, for that is what the ancients did when they were alive" (*Conversations with Eckermann*). And so in Whitman's music we find him turning away from one masterfully delicate verbal musician, Longfellow, toward the real world. Whitman respected Longfellow for his true gifts, as we ought to do. Our own scorn of Longfellow is cant. It is like the scorn of the great Victorian Englishmen that prevailed until recently under the influence of Lytton Strachey; we scurry forth like insects to deface them as soon as a serious, honorable man like Strachey assures us that Dickens, Tennyson, and Florence Nightingale are safely dead. So let us



turn, for just a moment, to Longfellow, whose lovely poetry, even in his own time, was in the strict sense a musical embodiment of the European past. In *Specimen Days* ("My Tribute to Four Poets"), Whitman records a visit to Longfellow which unmistakably reveals his true respect for the poet who was almost universally celebrated as the great poet whom Whitman himself would like to be: "I shall not soon forget his lit-up face," says Whitman, "and glowing warmth and courtesy in the modes of what is called the old school." And then Whitman suddenly, and rather startlingly, remarks on his own poetic relation to Longfellow and others (Emerson, Whittier, and Bryant):

In a late magazine one of my reviewers, who ought to know better, speaks of my "attitude of contempt and scorn and intolerance" toward the leading poets—of my "deriding" them, and preaching their "uselessness." If anybody cares to know what I think—and have long thought and avow'd—about them, I am entirely willing to propound. I can't imagine any better luck befalling these States for a poetical beginning and initiation than has come from Emerson, Longfellow, Bryant, and Whittier. . . . Longfellow for rich color, graceful forms and incidents—all that makes life beautiful and love refined—competing with the singers of Europe on their own ground, and with one exception, better and finer work than that of any of them.

Furthermore, Whitman's deep humility (an intellectual as well as a moral virtue) appears in his note on the "Death of Longfellow" (*Specimen Days*). There, in the very act of praising Longfellow for his best gift ("verbal melody") he speaks of his radical inadequacy; and thus Whitman inadvertently, almost as an afterthought, identifies his own great strength:

Longfellow in his voluminous works seems to me to be eminent in the style and forms of poetical expression that mark the present age, (an idiosyncrasy, almost a sickness, of verbal melody). . . . He is certainly the sort of bard and counter-actant most needed for our materialistic, self-assertive, money-worshipping, Anglo-Saxon races, and especially for the present age in America—an age tyrannically regulated with reference to the

manufacturer, the merchant, the financier, the politician and the day workman—for whom and among whom he comes as the poet of melody, courtesy, deference—*poet of the mellow twilight of the past* in Italy, Germany, Spain, and Northern Europe. . . . He strikes a splendid average, and does not sing exceptional passions, or humanity's jagged escapades. He is not revolutionary, brings nothing offensive or new, does not deal hard blows. . . . His very anger is gentle, is at second hand, (as in the "Quadroon Girl" and the "Witnesses"). . . . To the ungracious complaint-charge of his want of racy nativity and special originality, I shall only say that America and the world may well be reverently thankful—can never be thankful enough—for any such singing-bird vouchsafed out of the centuries, without asking that the notes be different from those of other songsters; 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.

The whole passage is moved by an impulse to pass beyond. Not merely to pass beyond what one hates—the phoniness, the counterfeit poetry which is always among us in its thousand blind, mean, sly forms. But to pass beyond what one loves, to open one's ears, to know what one is doing and why. It is a noble statement by a delicate and reverent man.

Let us apply the statement to Whitman's own music. In effect, he tunes his verses toward those very crass and difficult subjects which Longfellow (for whatever reason) avoided. And yet, even so, Whitman's music is not "jagged" like the escapades of that American humanity he often sings of. It is a *delicate* music, a deeper sound than that of Longfellow; it is alive, and it hurts, as men are hurt on the jagged edges of their own lives.

So Whitman respected Longfellow, a traditional prosodist. In spite of his poems like "Evangeline," which we are told to read as though they were written in the classical dactylic hexameter, Longfellow is predominantly an iambic writer. Moreover, he writes the iambic meter with a masterful grasp of its

permissive variations: the elisions, the trochaic substitutions, the spondaic effects and their euphonious combination within regular iambic patterns. But Longfellow does not write about American life. He does not write about its externals. And, shunning its externals, he does not penetrate to its spirit. Whitman notices these radical limits in the very act of praising Longfellow for his mastery—mastery of a kind which forces him to turn away from the living world and to sing either of Europe or of the American past.

Whitman also brings a rare technical understanding of prosody to bear on the living American present. But in his concern to surpass tradition, he deliberately shuns the iambic measure and all its variations, except in a very few instances (like the notorious "O Captain! My Captain!" and the less frequently quoted "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors") which offer a helpful contrast to the inventive delicacy of music in Whitman's greater poems.

He shuns the iambic measure. He says, in the 1855 Preface, "The rhythm and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws, and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs and roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges." Does Whitman mean that "free growth" is aimless? No, he speaks of "metrical laws." Listen to his poem "Reconciliation":

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,  
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time  
be utterly lost,  
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly  
softly wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world;  
For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,  
I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw  
near,  
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in  
the coffin.

We cannot understand this poem's music in traditional prosodic terms. Still, it's fun to note that Whitman did not write noniambic verse out of pique at his inability to control its rules.

Listen again to Whitman's opening line: "Word over all, beautiful as the sky." The line is a flawless iambic pentameter; he uses a trochaic substitution in the first foot, a hovering spondaic echo between the second and third feet, a daring and yet perfectly traditional inversion; and he successfully runs two light stresses before the final strong stress.

It seems to me wonderful that Whitman should have written that line, which is not only iambic, but as bold in its exploitation of the iambic possibilities as the masters themselves: Campion, Herrick, Wyatt, even Milton. And that is not so strange. In a note on "British Literature" (*Collect: Notes Left Over*), Whitman writes the following: "To avoid mistake, I would say that I not only commend the study of this literature, but wish our sources of supply and comparison vastly enlarged." The trouble is that "the British element these states hold, and have always held, enormously beyond its fit proportions . . . its products are no models for us." So he does not hate traditional British prosody, which is of course predominantly iambic. He loves its great craft, and he shows his ability to emulate it. But he is an adventurer; he wants to listen beyond the admittedly rich music of iambic, and to report what he hears.

In prosody, then, Whitman is sometimes a destroyer, but we must see that he knows exactly what he is destroying. He is both theoretically and practically ready to replace it with a new prosody of his own. He begins with a supremely sensitive ear for the music of language; he moves beyond the permissive variations of iambic; and he is not afraid of the new musical possibilities out there, so he brings some of them back with him. Perhaps they were there all the time; perhaps they are the quantitative possibilities of the classical languages that have drifted around in English. In any case, the iambic conventions do not seem to make much provision for them; and yet they can be incredibly beautiful in Whitman. We need only listen:

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



Whitman really does have something to teach current American poets, in spite of his entering American poetry once again, in Mr. Randall Jarrell's wicked phrase, as "the hero of a De Mille movie about Whitman"—a movie, one might add, which costars the Dead End Kids.

To summarize, Whitman can teach us about some possibilities of musical delicacy in our language. He sympathetically understood iambic forms (exemplified by Longfellow) which in his own poems he is trying to break and surpass. He can also teach courage, for he has great rhythmical daring; he seeks constantly for a music which really echoes and fulfills his imaginative vision.

He becomes a great artist by the ways of growth which Nietzsche magnificently describes in the first speech of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: the Three Metamorphoses of the Spirit. The spirit that truly grows, says Nietzsche, will first be a camel, a beast of burden, who labors to bear the forms of the past, whether in morality or art or anything else; then he will change into a lion, and destroy not merely what he hates but even what he loves and understands; and the result of this concerned and accurate destruction will be the spirit's emergence as a child, who is at last able to create clearly and powerfully from within his own imagination.

Whitman says of the great poet, "He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writings any elegance, or effect, or originality, to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtains" (Preface, 1855). And Whitman is well aware of the many curtains that can hang in the way. There is not only the old-world elegance of Longfellow—which may stand for the prosodic traditions of England, beautiful in themselves—but there is also the curtain of aimless destructiveness, which is eventually not even destructive but just trivial. In "After Trying a Certain Book" (*Specimen Days*), Whitman says that the difficulty of explaining what a poem means is not to be taken as evidence that the poem means nothing: "Common teachers or critics are always asking 'What does it mean?' Symphony of fine musician, or sunset, or sea-waves

rolling up the beach—what do they mean? Undoubtedly in the most subtle-elusive sense they mean something—but who shall fathom and define those meanings? (*I do not intend this as a warrant for wildness and frantic escapades. . . .*)" (my italics). Every scholar and every Beat who mentions Whitman ought to read that salutary note beforehand.

Now I want to speculate on the delicacy of Whitman's diction, his choice of words. What is remarkable is not merely his attempt to include new things—objects, persons, places, and events—in his poems. Something more interesting and complex goes on: in the face of this sometimes difficult and prosaic material ("humanity's jagged escapades"), he is able to retain his delicacy, which is a power of mind as well as a quality of kindness. In a crisis, he keeps his head and his feelings alert. He can be as precise as Henry James, as Mr. Jarrell rightly says; but he is sensitively precise about things that are often in themselves harsh, even brutal.

Mr. Jarrell has written one of the liveliest accounts of Whitman's delicacy of diction, and I refer the reader to that essay. Perhaps Mr. Jarrell does not sufficiently emphasize the enormous strength and courage it required even to face some of the horrible things Whitman faced, much less to claim them for the imagination by means of a diction that is as delicate as that of Keats.

One of my favorite poems in Whitman is "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown" from *Drum-Taps*. It reveals perfectly what I mean about Whitman's delicate diction: his power of retaining his sensitivity right in the face of realities that would certainly excuse coarseness, for the sake of self-defense if for no other reason. But Whitman does not defend himself. As he had told us in a Virgilian line, one of the noblest lines of poetry ever written, "I was the man, I suffered, I was there." The line is great because it is not a boast but a modest bit of information, almost as unobtrusive as a stage-direction or perhaps a whispered aside to the reader. (Whitman is always whispering to us—that is another of his musical delicacies.) There he certainly is, gathering the horror into his

delicate words, soothing it if possible, always looking at it and in the deepest sense imagining it:

A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown,  
A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the  
darkness,  
Our army foil'd with loss severe, and the sullen remnant  
retreating,  
Till after midnight glimmer upon us the lights of a dim-  
lighted building,  
We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the  
dim-lighted building,  
'Tis a large old church at the crossing roads, now an  
impromptu hospital,  
Entering but for a minute I see a sight beyond all the  
pictures and poems ever made,  
Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles  
and lamps,  
And by one great pitchy torch stationary with wild red  
flames and clouds of smoke,  
By these, crowds, groups of forms vaguely I see on the  
floor, some in the pews laid down,  
At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in  
danger of bleeding to death, (he is shot in the abdomen,)  
I stanch the blood temporarily, (the youngster's face  
is white as a lily,)  
Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o'er the scene fain to  
absorb it all,  
Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in  
obscurity, some of them dead,  
Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of  
ether, the odor of blood,  
The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms, the yard  
outside also fill'd,  
Some on the bare ground, some on planks or stretchers,  
some in the death-spasm sweating,  
An occasional scream or cry, the doctor's shouted orders or  
calls,  
The glisten of the little steel instruments catching the glint of  
the torches,

These I resume as I chant, I see again the forms, I smell the  
odor,  
Then hear outside the orders given, *Fall in, my men, fall in;*  
But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half-smile  
gives he me,  
Then the eyes close, calmly close, and I speed forth to the  
darkness,  
Resuming, marching, ever in darkness marching, on in the  
ranks,  
The unknown road still marching.

I want to draw attention to a single small detail of diction, which becomes huge because of its delicacy. I mean the phrase about the wounded young man's face. He suddenly looms up out of the confusion and darkness; he has been shot in the abdomen; and his face, buffaloe'd by shock, is "white as a lily."

There have been many poets in America who would compare a white face with a lily. There are also many poets who attempt to deal with a subject matter that is, like Whitman's, very far from the traditional materials of poesy as Longfellow understood them. Moreover, I know that there are many brave American men who write about painful experiences. But what is special about Whitman, what makes his diction remarkable in itself and fertile for us today, is that he does all three of these things at once, and in him they become a single act of creation. Unless we can see the nobility of his courage, then we have neither the right nor the intelligence to talk about the delicacy of his style.

Whitman's diction contains a lesson that can actually be learned, and it does not require the vain imitation of his personal appearance and stylistic mannerisms. It is more spiritually inward than any external accident can suggest. It is this: he deliberately seeks in American life the occasions and persons who are central to that life; he sometimes finds them harsh and violent, as in the war; and he responds to the harshness with a huge effort of imagination: to be delicate, precise, sensitive.



I realize that it is difficult to distinguish between the delicacy of Whitman's diction and his sensitivity as a man. But that is just the point. When a certain kind of diction, like a certain kind of meter, is employed by a coarse man, it automatically becomes a mannerism, or perhaps a stock device, detachable from the body of the poem, like a false eyelash, or a shapely artificial breast. Any concentration upon Whitman's stylistic mannerisms alone betrays an obsession with external, accidental things. Perhaps that is why so many bad poets have claimed Whitman as an ancestor.

I want also to say something about the delicacy of form in Whitman's poems. I think at once of the sentence in the 1855 Preface about rhythm and what he calls "uniformity." Here is the sentence again: "The rhythm and uniformity of perfect poems shows the free growth of metrical laws, and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs and roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges."

This sentence can help us to understand what "form" meant to Whitman and also what it might mean to contemporary poets in America and elsewhere, if they have truly learned from Whitman and still wish to learn from him. The word "form" itself, however, may be ambiguous. So I will shun rhetorical definitions, which often threaten to mislead or oversimplify; and I will discuss a single short poem that, I believe, is a great poem because of the almost perfect delicacy of its form:

I heard you solemn-sweet pipes of the organ as last Sunday  
 mourn I pass'd the church,  
 Winds of autumn, as I walk'd the woods at dusk I heard your  
 long-stretch'd sighs up above so mournful,  
 I heard the perfect Italian tenor singing at the opera, I heard  
 the soprano in the midst of the quartet singing;  
 Heart of my love! you too I heard murmuring low through  
 one of the wrists around my head,  
 Heard the pulse of you when all was still ringing little  
 bells last night under my ear.

Does this poem have a form? If so, how can I describe it without losing in a general classification the very details that give the poem its life? I can think of at least two possibly helpful ways of answering these questions. First, Mr. Gay Wilson Allen (in his definitive biography of Whitman) supplies us with a crucial bit of textual information. The version of "I heard you solemn-sweet pipes" which I just quoted is not the only one. An earlier version, one of three poems which Whitman published in 1861, is quoted and discussed by Mr. Allen. The revisions are almost all deletions. The earlier version (printed in the *New York Leader*, October 12, 1861) contained apostrophes to "war-suggesting trumpets," to "you round-lipp'd cannons." In the version which Whitman apparently considered final (printed in the "Deathbed" edition of 1892), the references to war are deleted. Whitman also deleted a whole single line, in which he addresses a lady who played "delicious music on the harp."

What is left? A simple poem of five lines. Whitman addresses four different sounds. In these apostrophes and in his arrangement of them we can find the form of his poem.

The form is that of parallelism. But immediately we have to distinguish between the grammatical signification of "parallelism" and Whitman's actual use of it. A grammatical parallelism is primarily concerned with sentence structure: noun balances noun, verb balances verb, either as repetition or as antithesis. But in Whitman's poem, the appearance of grammatical parallelism is so rare as to be almost accidental. In fact, he almost seems to avoid it. For he uses parallelism not as a device of repetition but as an occasion for development. For this reason, we take a certain risk when we read "I heard you solemn-sweet pipes." After the first two lines, we can know only two things: first, we cannot hope to rest on mere parallel sentence structure; second, the poet is probably going to sing about another sound, but it might be the sound of anything. (The possibility is a little scary in a country where, for example, President Coolidge's taciturnity is automatically considered a joke, instead of a great civic virtue. Behind the uneasy joke lies the

dreadful suspicion that we talk too much.) There is no way to read Whitman's poem at all unless we yield ourselves to its principle of growth, a principle that reveals itself only in this particular poem, stage by stage.

Whitman first tries to make sure that we will not confuse his poetic forms with the rules of grammar; and then he lets his images grow, one out of another; and finally, we discover the form of the poem as we read it, and we know what it is only after we have finished.

It is this kind of formal growth that, I believe, gives special appropriateness to Whitman's mention of "shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges." These fruits do indeed have "shapes"—delicate shapes indeed. And they are compact, not diffuse. Their life depends on their form, which grows out of the forms of blossoms, which in turn grew out of the forms of trees, which in turn grew out of the forms of seeds. If I followed the changes that overwhelm an orange seed, I should be startled at the unexpected form of each stage of growth; but the form would be there nevertheless, however unexpected: at once undreamed-of and inevitable.

I have avoided the term "organic unity" because I wanted to read Whitman's poem afresh; and I am afraid that we might confuse the philosophical definition of a term in aesthetics with our empirical attempt to pay attention to the form of a poem. Just as bad poets tend to substitute the external accidents of Whitman's personal mannerisms and habits of dress for his poetry, so we readers might tend to substitute a general term for our reading of poetry—any poetry. If you mention the name of Laforgue, for example, it is a rare graduate student who will not immediately say, or think, the phrase "romantic irony," just as certain famous dogs helplessly salivated when a bell was rung. That's a good simile, as W. C. Fields once observed in another connection. Moreover, the simile is horrible; I wish I could make it even more so.

What is "form"? It is not simply the rules of grammar. And it cannot simply be equated with certain conventions of iambic verse. When reviewers of current American verse say that a certain poem is written "in form," they usually mean it is pre-

dominantly iambic, either skillful or clumsy. But the form in Whitman's poems is not iambic. Form, in Whitman, is a principle of growth: one image or scene or sound *grows* out of another. The general device is parallelism, not of grammar but of action or some other meaning. Here is a further example of the parallel form, which is delicate and precise and therefore very powerful but which is not based on the repetition of the sentence structure:

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.

("Song of Myself," section 8)

Form in Whitman is a principle of imagination: the proliferating of images out of one unifying vision. Every real poem has its own form, which cannot be discovered through rhetoric, but only through imagination. Whitman can teach current American poets to destroy their own rhetoric and trust their own imagination. I shudder to think what would happen if every current versifier in America were to do that. (Is it a shudder of joy? A risky question.)

I began by asking what Whitman has to do with us, and where he is to be found. Some great writers of the past continue to exist as objects of veneration and study. They are no less great for all that. But Whitman is different, at least for us in America today, scholars and poets alike. Of course he deserves veneration, and he receives it. But he is also an immediate presence. He demands attention whether he is venerated or not. His work is capable of exerting direct power upon some conventional divisions in American life; and the power can heal the



division. For example, in America today we still suffer from the conventional division between scholarly study of poetry on one hand and the attempt to practice the living art of poetry on the other. But consider Mr. Malcolm Cowley's 1959 reprinting of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The reprinting is a work of the most careful scholarship: textual, historical, and biographical. It fully deserves the attention of scholars in the most dignified learned journals. It is respected by scholars who modestly accept their role as "academics"—men who labor faithfully by day at the scholarly profession, and are not especially interested in reading current American verse during their evenings at home with their families. And yet . . . Mr. Cowley's reprinting of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* is not only an act of sound scholarship; it is also an act of living poetry. I am sure that Mr. Cowley felt the relevance of Whitman's first edition to any lively interest in current American verse; but I doubt if he could have anticipated the effect of its living presence. The book itself is the newest poetry we have. It is as though the true spirit of Whitman had returned among us in order to rescue himself from the misinterpretations and abuses of his coarse imitators. He is, quite literally, living among us at this very moment; he has just published a new book; his poetry doesn't sound at all like the vast (too vast) clutter of work in two fairly representative anthologies of recent American verse: *The New Poets of England and America* (Meridian Books, 1957) and *The New American Poetry* (Grove Press, 1960). He is newer than both; he is precise, courageous, delicate and seminal—an abundant poet. I think it would be entirely appropriate to award a prize to Whitman for a beautiful first book; and to Mr. Cowley for a revelation in which scholarship and thrilling poetic vitality are one and the same.

I think Whitman can also be found in other places, and I will mention two of them.

The delicate strength of Whitman was recognized and loved long ago by poets in the Spanish language. It is remarkable how often they speak of him. Often they speak of him in poems. I have in mind Federico García Lorca's magnificent

"Ode to Walt Whitman," written in New York City at the end of the twenties. But the spirit of Whitman is everywhere present among Spanish and South American poets: in the form which rejects external rhetoric in order to discover and reveal a principle of growth; in the modesty and simplicity of diction; in the enormously courageous willingness to leap from one image into the unknown, in sheer faith that the next image will appear in the imagination; in the sensitive wholeness of the single poems which result from such imaginative courage; and, above all, in the belief in the imagination as the highest flowering of human life (the phrase belongs to Jorge Guillen), not just a rhetorical ornament. These are all powers of Whitman's spirit. They have been enlivening Spanish poetry for at least fifty years.

Moreover, we are in the midst of a wave of translation in the United States. The September, 1961, issue of *Poetry* (Chicago) is entirely devoted to translation. The poems of Pablo Neruda of Chile, Cesar Vallejo of Peru, and of several great writers from Spain—Juan Ramon Jimenez, Antonio Machado, Jorge Guillen, Miguel Hernandez, and Blas de Otero, to name only a few—are being not only read but also translated by several American writers, and this effort cannot help but lead to Whitman. It is sometimes said that the true spirit of Poe was absorbed into contemporary American literature only after Poe had been truly understood by the French. Perhaps the true Whitman may return to the United States from Spain and South America "through the sky that is below the ground" (Jimenez).

We have spirits capable of welcoming him. Louis Simpson's imagination is obsessed with the most painful details of current American life, which he reveals under a very powerfully developed sense of American history. Several of his latest poems directly address Whitman as a figure who discovers that the Open Road has led to the barren Pacific, to the used-car graveyard, to the earthly paradise of the real-estate agents. Mr. Simpson describes America and Americans in a vision totally free from advertising and propaganda, just as Whitman de-

scribed the Civil War soldiers, not as "Our Boys" or suchlike, but rather as startled white faces of youths shot in the abdomen.

Robert Bly's Whitmanesque powers include the ability to write about what he calls "the dark figures of politics." A remarkable sequence describing such "figures" is *Poems for the Ascension of J. P. Morgan*, published in *New World Writing* #15. I want to quote a new poem of Bly's. It is called "After the Industrial Revolution, All Things Happen at Once."

Now we enter a strange world, where the Hessian Christmas  
Still goes on, and Washington has not reached the other  
shore;

The Whiskey Boys  
Are gathering again on the meadows of Pennsylvania  
And the Republic is still sailing on the open sea.

In 1956 I saw a black angel in Washington, dancing  
On a barge, saying, Let us now divide kennel dogs  
And hunting dogs; Henry Cabot Lodge, in New York,  
Talking of sugar cane in Cuba; Ford,  
In Detroit, drinking mothers' milk;  
Ford, saying, "History is bunk!"  
And Wilson saying, "What is good for General Motors—"

Who is it, singing? Don't you hear singing?  
It is the dead of Cripple Creek;  
Coxey's army  
Like turkeys are singing from the tops of trees!  
And the Whiskey Boys are drunk outside Philadelphia.

Denise Levertov, an extremely gifted poet, suggests Whitman in several ways: her reverence for the civilization of the past, so deep as to be utterly modest; her willingness to discover the new forms of her imagination; and her nobility of spirit, which knows what is worthy of celebration and is capable of great moral understanding. Two of her recent poems (included in her superb book from New Directions, *The Jacob's Ladder*), "In Memory of Boris Pasternak" and "During the Eichmann Trial," embody this nobility perfectly. The latter sequence includes a cry of pity for Adolf Eichmann; and Miss

Levertov sees everyone in the twentieth century caught and exposed in Eichmann's glass cage. The subject is almost unendurably horrible; and it is treated with a tenderness which is in itself an imaginative strength of great purity.

So Whitman is alive; in person, with his own poems; in spirit, among the Spanish writers who long ago understood him; and among certain American writers, in their translations and in their own spiritual courage. Whitman has delicacy; moreover, he dared to subject his delicacy to the tests of the real world, both the external world of nineteenth-century America, with its wars and loud cities and buffaloes vanishing into herds of clouds, and the inner world of his spirit. He loved the human body, he knew that when you kill a man he dies, and he exposed his feelings to the coarsest of wars in order to record its truth. He had nothing against British literature; but he felt that Americans have even greater stores of imagination to draw upon. Here are some of his words, from *Collect: Notes Left Over*:

I strongly recommend all the young men and young women of the United States to whom it may be eligible, to overhaul the well-freighted fleets, the literature of Italy, Spain, France, Germany, so full of those elements of freedom, self-possession, gay-heartedness, subtlety, dilation, needed in preparations for the future of the States. I only wish we could have really good translations. I rejoice at the feeling for Oriental researches and poetry, and hope it will continue.

The man who wrote those words was not only a very great poet. He was also a generous human being, and he rejoiced in the hopes of his fellows. I believe that American poetry at this moment is able to show itself worthy of Whitman's intelligence, his courage, his supremely delicate imagination. At any rate, many living American poets cherish Whitman's best powers; and one cannot love such things without being inwardly changed. We honor Whitman; and we share the happy thought that he would have been delighted and would have wanted to honor us in return. Surely he would have loved another new American poem which occurs to me, for it speaks



with his own best voice—uncluttered, courageous, and kind. The poem is Mr. David Ignatow's "Walt Whitman in the Civil War Hospitals," which I quote in its entirety:

Prescient, my hands soothing  
their foreheads, by my love  
I earn them. In their presence  
I am wretched as death. They smile  
to me of love. They cheer me  
and I smile. These are stones  
in the catapulting world;  
they fly, bury themselves in flesh,  
in a wall, in earth; in midair  
break against each other  
and are without sound.  
I sent them catapulting.  
They outflow my voice  
towards vacant spaces,  
but I have called them farther,  
to the stillness beyond,  
to death which I have praised.

That summon the flesh to fall.  
Be glad of the green wall  
You climbed across one day,  
When winter stung with ice  
That vacant paradise.

## The Seasonless

When snows begin to fill the park,  
It is not hard to keep the eyes  
Secure against the flickering dark,  
Aware of summer ghosts that rise.  
The blistered trellis seems to move  
The memory toward root and rose,  
The empty fountain fills the air  
With spray that spangled women's hair;  
And men who walk this park in love  
May bide the time of falling snows.

The trees recall their greatness now;  
They were not always vague and bowed  
With loads that build the slender bough  
Till branches bear a tasteless fruit.  
A month ago they rose and bore  
Fleashes of berry, leaf, and shade:  
How painlessly a man recalls  
The stain of green on crooked walls,  
The summer never known before,  
The garden heaped to bloom and fade.

Beyond the holly bush and path  
The city lies to meet the night,  
And also there the quiet earth  
Relies upon the lost delight  
To rise again and fill the dark  
With waterfalls and swallows' sound.  
Beyond the city's lazy fume,  
The sea repeats the fall of spume,

From  
James Wright,  
Above The River:  
Complete Poems

And gulls remember cries they made  
When lovers fed them off the ground.

But lonely underneath a heap  
Of overcoat and crusted ice,  
A man goes by, and looks for sleep.  
The spring of everlastingness.  
Nothing about his face revives  
A longing to evade the cold.  
The night returns to keep him old,  
And why should he, the lost and lulled,  
Pray for the night of vanished lives,  
The day of girls blown green and gold?

## The Horse

*the glory of his nostrils is terrible.*  
Job 39:20

He kicked the world, and lunging long ago  
Rose dripping with the dew of lawns,  
Where new wind tapped him to a frieze  
Against a wall of rising autumn leaves.  
Some young foolhardy dweller of the barrows,  
To grip his knees around the flanks,  
Leaped from a tree and shivered in the air.  
Joy clawed inside the bones  
And flesh of the rider at the mane  
Flopping and bounding over the dark banks.

Joy and terror floated on either side  
Of the rider rearing. The supreme speed  
Jerked to a height so spaced and wide  
He seemed among the areas of the dead.  
The flesh was free, the sky was rockless, clear,  
The road beneath the feet was pure, the soul  
Spun naked to the air  
And lanced against a solitary pole  
Of cumulus, to curve and roll



6  
Staring politely, they will not mark my face  
From any murderer's, buried in this place.  
Why should they? We are nothing but a man.

7  
Doty, the rapist and the murderer,  
Sleeps in a ditch of fire, and cannot hear;  
And where, in earth or hell's unholy peace,  
Men's suicides will stop, God knows, not I.  
Angels and pebbles mock me under trees.  
Earth is a door I cannot even face.  
Order be damned, I do not want to die,  
Even to keep Belaire, Ohio, safe.  
The hackles on my neck are fear, not grief.  
(Open, dungeon! Open, roof of the ground!)  
I hear the last sea in the Ohio grass,  
Heaving a tide of gray disastrousness.  
Wrinkles of winter ditch the rotted face  
Of Doty, killer, imbecile, and thief:  
Dirt of my flesh, defeated, underground.

### Saint Judas

When I went out to kill myself, I caught  
A pack of hoodlums beating up a man.  
Running to spare his suffering, I forgot  
My name, my number, how my day began,  
How soldiers milled around the garden stone  
And sang amusing songs; how all that day  
Their javelins measured crowds; how I alone  
Bargained the proper coins, and slipped away.

Banished from heaven, I found this victim beaten,  
Stripped, kneed, and left to cry. Dropping my rope  
Aside, I ran, ignored the uniforms:  
Then I remembered bread my flesh had eaten,  
The kiss that ate my flesh. Flayed without hope,  
I held the man for nothing in my arms.



2

## Some Translations

(from *Collected Poems*  
and new translations)

*In memory of Betty Kray*

3

As I Step over a Puddle at the End  
of Winter, I Think of an  
Ancient Chinese Governor

*And how can I, born in evil days  
And fresh from failure, ask a kindness of Fate?*

—Written A.D. 819

Po Chu-i, balding old politician,  
What's the use?  
I think of you,  
Uneasily entering the gorges of the Yang-Tze,  
When you were being towed up the rapids  
Toward some political job or other  
In the city of Chungshou.  
You made it, I guess,  
By dark.

But it is 1960, it is almost spring again,  
And the tall rocks of Minneapolis  
Build me my own black twilight  
Of bamboo ropes and waters.  
Where is Yuan Chen, the friend you loved?  
Where is the sea, that once solved the whole loneliness  
Of the Midwest? Where is Minneapolis? I can see nothing  
But the great terrible oak tree darkening with winter.  
Did you find the city of isolated men beyond mountains?  
Or have you been holding the end of a frayed rope  
For a thousand years?

Goodbye to the Poetry of Calcium

*Dark cypresses—  
The world is uneasily happy:  
It will all be forgotten.*

—Theodor Storm

Mother of roots, you have not seeded  
The tall ashes of loneliness  
For me. Therefore,  
Now I go.  
If I knew the name,



Lying in a Hammock  
at William Duffy's Farm  
in Pine Island, Minnesota

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,  
Asleep on the black trunk,  
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.  
Down the ravine behind the empty house,  
The cowbells follow one another  
Into the distances of the afternoon.  
To my right,  
In a field of sunlight between two pines,  
The droppings of last year's horses  
Blaze up into golden stones.  
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.  
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.  
I have wasted my life.

The Jewel

There is this cave  
In the air behind my body  
That nobody is going to touch:  
A cloister, a silence  
Closing around a blossom of fire.  
When I stand upright in the wind,  
My bones turn to dark emeralds.

In the Face of Hatred

I am frightened by the sorrow  
Of escaping animals.  
The snake moves slowly  
Beyond his horizon of yellow stone.  
A great harvest of convicts has shaken loose  
And hurries across the wall of your eyes.

4  
Only two boys,  
Trailed by shadows of rooted police,  
Turn aimlessly in the lashing elderberries.  
One cries for his father's death,  
And the other, the silent one,  
Listens into the hallway  
Of a dark leaf.

Fear Is What Quickens Me

1  
Many animals that our fathers killed in America  
Had quick eyes.  
They stared about wildly,  
When the moon went dark.  
The new moon falls into the freight yards  
Of cities in the south,  
But the loss of the moon to the dark hands of Chicago  
Does not matter to the deer  
In this northern field.

2  
What is that tall woman doing  
There, in the trees?  
I can hear rabbits and mourning doves whispering together  
In the dark grass, there  
Under the trees.

3  
I look about wildly.

A Message Hidden in an Empty Wine Bottle  
That I Threw into a Gully of Maple Trees  
One Night at an Indecent Hour

Women are dancing around a fire

Wine darkens in stone jars in villages.  
Wine sleeps in the mouths of old men, it is a dark red color.

Smiles glitter in Madrid.  
Eisenhower has touched hands with Franco, embracing  
In a glare of photographers.  
Clean new bombers from America muffle their engines  
And glide down now.  
Their wings shine in the searchlights  
Of bare fields,  
In Spain.

### In Memory of a Spanish Poet

*Take leave of the sun, and of the wheat, for me.*  
—Miguel Hernández,  
written in prison, 1942

I see you strangling  
Under the black ripples of whitewashed walls.  
Your hands turn yellow in the ruins of the sun.  
I dream of your slow voice, flying,  
Planting the dark waters of the spirit  
With lutes and seeds.

Here, in the American Midwest,  
Those seeds fly out of the field and across the strange heaven of  
my skull.  
They scatter out of their wings a quiet farewell,  
A greeting to my country.

Now twilight gathers,  
A long sundown.  
Silos creep away toward the west.

5  
Stairway, face, window,  
Mottled animals  
Running over the public buildings.  
Maple and elm.  
In the autumn  
Of early evening,  
A pumpkin  
Lies on its side,  
Turning yellow as the face  
Of a discharged general.  
It's no use complaining, the economy  
Is going to hell with all these radical  
Changes,  
Girls the color of butterflies  
That can't be sold.  
Only after nightfall,  
Little boys lie still, awake,  
Wondering, wondering,  
Delicate little boxes of dust.

### Twilights

The big stones of the cistern behind the barn  
Are soaked in whitewash.  
My grandmother's face is a small maple leaf  
Pressed in a secret box.  
Locusts are climbing down into the dark green crevices  
Of my childhood. Latches click softly in the trees. Your hair is  
gray.

The arbors of the cities are withered.  
Far off, the shopping centers empty and darken.

A red shadow of steel mills.



And she did not know them.

It is hard to breathe  
In a tight grave:

So she roars,  
And the roof breaks.  
Dark rivers and leaves  
Pour down.

When the wind opens its doors  
In its own good time,  
The cubs follow that relaxed and beautiful woman  
Outside to the unfamiliar cities  
Of moss.

### Trying to Pray

This time, I have left my body behind me, crying  
In its dark thorns.  
Still,  
There are good things in this world.  
It is dusk.  
It is the good darkness  
Of women's hands that touch loaves.  
The spirit of a tree begins to move.  
I touch leaves.  
I close my eyes, and think of water.

### Two Spring Charms

*Fragments from the Norwegian*

1

Now it is late winter.

Years ago,

In a field near Trondhjem.

2

Black snow,  
Like a strange sea creature,  
Draws back into itself,  
Restoring grass to earth.

### Spring Images

Two athletes  
Are dancing in the cathedral  
Of the wind.

A butterfly lights on the branch  
Of your green voice.

Small antelopes  
Fall asleep in the ashes  
Of the moon.

### Arriving in the Country Again

The white house is silent.  
My friends can't hear me yet.  
The flicker who lives in the bare tree at the field's edge  
Pecks once and is still for a long time.  
I stand still in the late afternoon.  
My face is turned away from the sun.  
A horse grazes in my long shadow.

6

## In the Cold House

I slept a few minutes ago,  
Even though the stove has been out for hours.  
I am growing old.  
A bird cries in bare elder trees.

## Snowstorm in the Midwest

Though haunches of whales  
Slope into whitecap doves,  
It is hard to drown here.

Between two walls,  
A fold of echoes,  
A girl's voice walks naked.

I step into the water  
Of two flakes.  
The crowns of white birds rise  
To my ankles,  
To my knees,  
To my face.

Escaping in silence  
From locomotive and smoke,  
I hunt the huge feathers of gulls  
And the fountains of hills,  
I hunt the sea, to walk on the waters.

A played starling  
Follows me down a long stairway  
Of white sand.

## Having Lost My Sons, I Confront the Wreckage of the Moon: Christmas, 1960

After dark  
Near the South Dakota border,  
The moon is out hunting, everywhere,  
Delivering fire,  
And walking down hallways  
Of a diamond.

Behind a tree,  
It lights on the ruins  
Of a white city:  
Frost, frost.

Where are they gone,  
Who lived there?

Bundled away under wings  
And dark faces.

I am sick  
Of it, and I go on,  
Living, alone, alone,  
Past the charred silos, past the hidden graves  
Of Chippewas and Norwegians.

This cold winter  
Moon spills the inhuman fire  
Of jewels  
Into my hands.

Dead riches, dead hands, the moon  
Darkens,  
And I am lost in the beautiful white ruins  
Of America.



They canter, without making a sound, along the shores  
Of melting snow.

### To the Evening Star: Central Minnesota

Under the water tower at the edge of town  
A hugh Aredale ponders a long ripple  
In the grass fields beyond.  
Miles off, a whole grove silently  
Flies up into the darkness.  
One light comes on in the sky,  
One lamp on the prairie.

Beautiful daylight of the body, your hands carry seashells.  
West of this wide plain,  
Animals wilder than ours  
Come down from the green mountains in the darkness.  
Now they can see you, they know  
The open meadows are safe.

### I Was Afraid of Dying

Once,  
I was afraid of dying  
In a field of dry weeds.  
But now,  
All day long I have been walking among damp fields,  
Trying to keep still, listening  
To insects that move patiently.  
Perhaps they are sampling the fresh dew that gathers slowly  
In empty snail shells  
And in the secret shelters of sparrow feathers fallen on the  
earth.

### A Blessing

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,  
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.  
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies  
Darken with kindness.  
They have come gladly out of the willows  
To welcome my friend and me.  
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture  
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.  
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness  
That we have come.  
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.  
There is no loneliness like theirs.  
At home once more,  
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.  
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,  
For she has walked over to me  
And nuzzled my left hand.  
She is black and white,  
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,  
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear  
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.  
Suddenly I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.

### Milkweed

While I stood here, in the open, lost in myself,  
I must have looked a long time  
Down the corn rows, beyond grass,  
The small house,  
White walls, animals lumbering toward the barn.  
I look down now. It is all changed.  
Whatever it was I lost, whatever I wept for  
Was a wild, gentle thing, the small dark eyes  
Loving me in secret.  
It is here. At a touch of my hand,

A spirit of vine wondering  
At a grape here and there,  
As the September spider,  
The master, ascends  
Her long spine.

Already she weighs more, yet  
She still bows down slightly,  
As I stand in her doorway.  
It's not hunching, it's only  
That children have been reaching  
Upward for years to gather  
Sweetness of her face.  
They are innocent and passionate  
Thieves of the secret hillsides.  
Now she rises, tall, round, round.  
And round again, and, again, round.

### Sun Tan at Dusk

When was the last time  
You remembered you  
Had gone out? A bee  
Blew past me. Jays  
Raised hell down stream,  
You rose up  
Slow out of the mountain pool.  
Color of doe out of green  
Against dark.  
The fawn's honey weeping down stream.  
I just got up. This is  
When I wake.

Quick on my feet in those novembers of my loneliness,  
I tossed a short pass,  
Almost the instant I got the ball, right over the head  
Of Barrel Terry before he knocked me cold.

When I woke, I found myself crying out  
Latin conjugations, and the new snow falling  
At the edge of a green field.

Lemoyne Crone had caught the pass, while I lay  
Unconscious and raging  
Alone with the fire ghost of Catullus, the contemptuous  
graces tossing  
Garlands and hendecasyllabics over the head  
Of Cornelius Nepos the mastodon,  
The huge volume.

At the edges of Southeast Asia this afternoon  
The quarterbacks and the lines are beginning to fall,  
A spring snow,

And terrified young men  
Quick on their feet  
Lob one another's skulls across  
Wings of strange birds that are burning  
Themselves alive.

(Note: Carpenter, a West Pointer, called for his own troops to be repalmed rather than have them surrender. General Westmoreland called him "hero" and made him his aide, and President Johnson awarded him a Silver Star for courage.)

### The Pretty Redhead

*From the French of Apollinaire*

I stand here in the sight of everyone a man full of sense  
Knowing life and knowing of death what a living man can know



Having gone through the griefs and happinesses of love  
Having known sometimes how to impose his ideas  
Knowing several languages  
Having travelled more than a little  
Having seen war in the artillery and the infantry  
Wounded in the head trepanned under chloroform  
Having lost his best friends in the horror of battle

I know as much as one man alone can know  
Of the ancient and the new  
And without troubling myself about this war today  
Between us and for us my friends  
I judge this long quarrel between tradition and imagination  
Between order and adventure

You whose mouth is made in the image of God's mouth  
Mouth which is order itself  
Judge kindly when you compare us  
With those who were the very perfection of order  
We who are seeking everywhere for adventure

We are not your enemies  
Who want to give ourselves vast strange domains  
Where mystery flowers into any hands that long for it  
Where there are new fires colors never seen  
A thousand fantasies difficult to make sense out of  
They must be made real  
All we want is to explore kindness the enormous country where  
everything is silent  
And there is time which somebody can banish or welcome home  
Pity for us who fight always on the frontiers  
Of the illimitable and the future  
Pity our mistakes pity our sins

Here summer is coming the violent season  
And so my youth is as dead as spring  
Oh Sun it is the time of reason grown passionate  
And I am still waiting  
To follow the forms she takes noble and gentle  
So I may love her alone

10  
She comes and draws me as a magnet draws filaments of iron  
She has the lovely appearance  
Of an adorable redhead  
Her hair turns golden you would say  
A beautiful lightning flash that goes on and on  
Or the flames that spread out their feathers  
In wilting tea roses

But laugh laugh at me  
Men everywhere especially people from here  
For there are so many things that I don't dare to tell you  
So many things that you would not let me say  
Have pity on me

### Echo for the Promise of Georg Trakl's Life

Quiet voice,  
In the midst of those blazing  
Howitzers in blossom.  
Their fire  
Is a vacancy.

What do those stuttering machines  
Have to do  
With the solitude?

Guns make no sound.  
Only the quiet voice  
Speaks from the body of the deer  
To the body of the woman.

My own body swims in a silent pool,  
And I make silence.

They both hear me.  
Hear me,  
Father of my sound,  
My poor son.

We sang all afternoon, we tossed  
A willing honey under the tongue.  
I must have seemed a silly ghost.  
Pity me now. I was just young.

### Small Frogs Killed on the Highway

Still,  
I would leap too  
Into the light,  
If I had the chance.  
It is everything, the wet green stalk of the field  
On the other side of the road.  
They crouch there, too, faltering in terror  
And take strange wing. Many  
Of the dead never moved, but many  
Of the dead are alive forever in the split second  
Auto headlights more sudden  
Than their drivers know.  
The drivers burrow backward into dank pools  
Where nothing begets  
Nothing.

Across the road, tadpoles are dancing  
On the quarter thumbnail  
Of the moon. They can't see,  
Not yet.

### A Way to Make a Living

*From an epigram by Plato*

When I was a boy, a relative  
Asked for me a job  
At the Weeks Cemetery.

Ready to live my life  
Out on my knees, humming,  
Kneading up docks  
And sumac from  
Those flawless clerks-at-court, those beautiful  
Grocers and judges, the polished  
Dead of whom we make  
So much.

I could have stayed there with them.  
Cheap, too.  
Imagine, never  
To have turned  
Wholly away from the classic  
Cold, the hill, so laid  
Out, measure by seemly measure clipped  
And mown by old man Albright  
The sexton. That would have been a hell of  
A way to make a living.

Thank you, no.  
I am going to take my last nourishment  
Of measure from a dark blue  
Ripple on swell on ripple that makes  
Its own garlands.  
My dead are the secret wine jars  
Of Tyrian commercial travelers.  
Their happiness is a lost beginning, their graves  
Drift in and out of the Mediterranean.

One of these days  
The immortals, clinging to a beam of sunlight  
Under water, delighted by delicate crustaceans,  
Will dance up thirty-foot walls of radiance,  
And waken,  
The sea shining on their shoulders, the fresh  
Wine in their arms. Their ships have drifted away.



Don't you remember? You said to me, Come on,  
Get in, and we drove down to Brookside.

I remember your fury because I got a stuck piece of  
Coal in my eye.

Come on, paul, said your friend,  
Rattling the rattle.  
You told him to go to hell.  
Because I had a speck of coal  
In my eye.

You were making less than twenty dollars a week.  
You drove that cracked truck down to Brookside lovelier and  
friendlier  
Than Alcaeus loving Sappho.

You wouldn't even know what I'm talking about.

I wouldn't even know what you're talking about.

By God, I know this much:  
When a fine young man is true to his true love  
And can face out a fine deep shock on his jaw  
(That scar so low off, that true scar of love),  
And when a man can stand up in the middle of America  
(That brutal and savage place whom I still love),

Never mind your harangues about religion.  
Anybody could pick me up out of the street  
Is good to me, I would like to be good

To you, too, good man.

### In Memory of Charles Coffin

What was that cold and ugly thing  
That snuck into your brain and killed

In hand to you, were you alive.  
I still care knowing you believe  
In the body a soul can give.  
You heard the soul rave and you send  
A lonely echo of good Mars.  
In that black summer when I worked  
At the Mount Vernon, Ohio, Bridge  
Company, I came damn near  
Killing a man, and going blind.  
All right, you said: Ben Jonson said  
Give Salathiel Pavy one  
More chance, and give yourself one more.  
No, I have no idea where  
You lie in Mary's ground alone.  
I know, well, you would approve  
Of this intricate sound I make.  
It has three beats, though your heart break.

My loving teacher, whom I love,  
It is almost too late to live.

### At the Grave

All I am doing is walking here alone.  
I am not among the English poets.  
I am not even going to be among  
The English poets after my death.  
You loved them the best.  
And you liked me, fine. It is still raining  
This morning, this November morning.  
And I am not even standing at your grave.  
I am fiddling with a notebook in New York,  
Wondering about Ohio where now at this moment  
A leaf hangs on a locust thorn shredding  
Its form into the rain.  
John Keats, coughing his lungs out,  
John Clare, crazy,  
And Geoffrey Chaucer the only one.

And Edward Thomas, who got killed, the only  
 Soldier in this century who was sane.  
 If these lines get published, I will hear  
 From some God damned deaf moron who knows  
 Everything. The dead are nothing.  
 And he will be right.  
 The living giggle in the dark all night,  
 And the dead are nothing. I nearly got  
 My knees smashed at the Mount Vernon, Ohio, Bridge Company  
 That summer when I worked among the swinging girders,  
 To make enough money so I could write a good essay  
 For you. The essay wasn't all that good, but you loved it,  
 And you loved me. Steubenville,  
 Ohio, is a hell of a place to be buried.  
 But there are some lovely places to be buried.  
 Like Rome. Listen. So help me sweet leaping  
 Christ, it is going to be a cold day  
 In hell when any Johnny Bull knows  
 What I am saying to you:  
 I have found a woman who lives, and so  
 I am going to Rome with her  
 For a long time yet.  
 It is raining today in Steubenville.  
 Blessed be the dead whom the rain rains upon.  
 And damned the living who have their few days.  
 And blessed your thorned face,  
 Your shragged November,  
 Your leaf,  
 Lost.

### Hotel Lenox

And she loved loving  
 So she woke and bloomed  
 And she rose.

And many men had been there  
 To drowse awake and go downstairs  
 Lonely for coffee and bread.

But she drowed awake lonely  
 For coffee and bread.

And went upstairs  
 with me, and we had  
 Coffee and bread.

And then we were so happy to see the lovely  
 Mother who had been her mother a long time.

In this city broken on the wheel

We went back to the warm caterpillar of our hotel.

And the wings took.

Oh lovely place,

Oh tree.

We climbed into the branches  
 Of the lady's tree.

We birds sang.

And the lemon light flew out over the river.

### The Streets Grow Young

1

One first summer evening in Paris my love and I strolled amc  
 The young students, studying the cathedrals  
 In one another's faces.

No rain there.

Inside an alley behind our own green bones  
 A peaked woman of fifty years, I guess,  
 Darted straight down at me in the darkness  
 And bluntly asked for a coin.

What did they do  
To your hand? I answered,  
He raised up his hook into the terrible starlight  
And slashed the wind.

Oh, that? he said.  
I had a bad time with a woman. Here,  
You take this.

Did you ever feel a man hold  
Sixty-five cents  
In a hook,  
And place it  
Gently  
In your freezing hand?

I took it.  
It wasn't the money I needed.  
But I took it.

### To a Blossoming Pear Tree

Beautiful natural blossoms,  
Pure delicate body,  
You stand without trembling.  
Little mist of fallen starlight,  
Perfect, beyond my reach,  
How I envy you.  
For if you could only listen,  
I would tell you something,  
Something human.

An old man  
Appeared to me once  
In the unendurable snow.  
He had a sinige of white  
Beard on his face.  
He paused on a street in Minneapolls  
And stroked my face.

Give it to me, he begged.  
I'll pay you anything.

I flinched. Both terrified,  
We slunk away,  
Each in his own way dodging  
The cruel darts of the cold.

Beautiful natural blossoms,  
How could you possibly  
Worry or bother or care  
About the ashamed, hopeless  
Old man? He was so near death  
He was willing to take  
Any love he could get,  
Even at the risk  
Of some mocking policeman  
Or some cute young wiseacre  
Smashing his dentures,  
Perhaps leading him on  
To a dark place and there  
Kicking him in his dead groin  
Just for the fun of it.

Young tree, unburdened  
By anything but your beautiful natural blossoms  
And dew, the dark  
Blood in my body drags me  
Down with my brother.

### Beautiful Ohio

Those old Winnebago men  
Knew what they were singing.  
All summer long and all alone,  
I had found a way  
To sit on a railroad tie  
Above the sewer main.  
It spilled a shining waterfall out of a pine



Alone, like seedlings lost in a cloud of snowflakes.  
I would rather leave them alone, even  
In my imagination, or, better still,  
Leave them to you.

## Leaving the Temple in Nîmes

And, sure enough,  
I came face to face with the spring.  
Down in the wet darkness of the winter moss  
Still gathering in the Temple of Diana,  
I came to the trunk of a huge umbrella pine  
Vivid and ancient as always,  
Among the shaped stones.  
I couldn't see the top of the branches,  
I stood down there in the pathway so deep.  
But a vine held its living leaves all the way down  
To my hands. So I carry away with me  
Four ivy leaves:

In gratitude to the tall pale girl  
Who still walks somewhere behind the pine tree,  
Slender as her hounds.  
In honor of the solitary poet,  
Ausonius, adorer of the southern hillsides  
Who drank of the sacred spring  
Before he entered this very holy place  
And slowly tuned the passionate silver  
Of his Latin along the waters.

And I will send one ivy leaf, green in winter,  
Home to an American girl I know.  
I caught a glimpse of her once in a dream,  
Shaking out her dark and adventurous hair.  
She revealed only a little of her face  
Through the armful of pussy willow she gathered  
Alive in spring,  
Alive along the Schuylkill in Philadelphia.

15  
She will carry this ivy leaf from Diana's pine  
As she looks toward Camden, across the river,  
Where Walt Whitman, the chaste wanderer  
Among the live-oaks, the rain, railyards and battlefields,  
Lifts up his lovely face  
To the moon and allows it to become  
A friendly ruin.  
The innocent huntress will come down after dark,  
Brush the train smoke aside, and leave alone together  
The old man rooted in an ugly place  
Pure with his lovingkindness,  
And a girl with an ivy leaf revealing her face  
Among fallen pussy willow.

## A Winter Daybreak above Vence

The night's drifts  
Pile up below me and behind my back,  
Slide down the hill, rise again, and build  
Eerie little dunes on the roof of the house.  
In the valley below me,  
Miles between me and the town of St-Jeannet,  
The road lamps glow.  
They are so cold, they might as well be dark.  
Trucks and cars  
Cough and drone down there between the golden  
Coffins of greenhouses, the startled squawk  
Of a rooster claws heavily across  
A grove, and drowns.  
The gumming snarl of some grouchy dog sounds,  
And a man bitterly shifts his broken gears.  
True night still hangs on,  
Mist cluttered with a racket of its own.

Now on the mountainside,  
A little way downhill among turning rocks,  
A square takes form in the side of a dim wall.  
I hear a bucket rattle or something, tinny,  
No other stirring behind the dim face

Of the goatherd's house. I imagine  
His goats are still sleeping, dreaming  
Of the fresh roses  
Beyond the walls of the greenhouse below them  
And of lettuce leaves opening in Tunisia.

I turn, and somehow  
Impossibly hovering in the air over everything,  
The Mediterranean, nearer to the moon  
Than this mountain is,  
Shines. A voice clearly  
Tells me to snap out of it. Galway  
Mutters out of the house and up the stone stairs  
To start the motor. The moon and the stars  
Suddenly flicker out, and the whole mountain  
Appears, pale as a shell.

Look, the sea has not fallen and broken  
Our heads. How can I feel so warm  
Here in the dead center of January? I can  
Scarcely believe it, and yet I have to, this is  
The only life I have. I get up from the stone.  
My body mumbles something unseemly  
And follows me. Now we are all sitting here strangely  
On top of the sunlight.