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Walt Whitman and the Demise of Organic Reading

John G. Blair

> This "all" feeling, though, there is some truth in. You must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion. – Herman Melville[1]

The thrust of my title may need clarification. In this century Walt Whitman is the one all aspiring American poets have to weigh in against sooner or later. By the same token, any researcher who like myself is concerned with the specificities of American literature and American culture must take into account this self-proclaimed national bard who promised, for once if not for all, to make a poem up to the measure of the nation itself. He felt authorized to carry out this grandiose task by well-established Romantic conceptions. The nation could be assimilated to the poem because both shared the organic unity common to all 'natural' entities.

But if such was Whitman's theory, in practice he created in his catalogues a poetic principle whose implications point far beyond the organic toward literary structuring that would not become widespread before our own time. In particular, as I hope to show, the principle of order in Whitman's most distinctive device, the catalogue, introduces a principle of unpredictability which makes the elements in such a catalogue interchangeable rather than rooted in one unique, organically ordained sequence.

"Organic reading" refers to the ways we have been trained to read

[1] Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, June 1851, *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis & William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 131.

poetry. Though this is hardly the place for an extended essay on the complex of concepts that we englobe under the label "organic," a moment's reflection suffices to remind us of how pervasive such notions have been not only in nineteenth-century literature but also in twentieth-century criticism. Our notions of what to read for have substantially prolonged the influence of Coleridge, despite the claims of T. S. Eliot and others that they were abandoning (and improving on) Romantic presumptions in everything that they said. Summarily reiterated, organic theory proclaimed the world of nature, plant nature in particular, as the privileged source of metaphor, despite the palpable difficulties of seeing the poem as a tree. What Coleridge and his successors wanted to highlight, of course, was that the work of literature should have no more waste motion than does a tree (none) and that all its parts should be found in their "natural" place. Criticism carried out under this flag could honor the organic concept in a usefully large gamut of possibilities: so-called critical biographies showing the connectedness between the author's life and his art served the cause no less well than did the later emphasis on formal unity-in-complexity sponsored by the American New Criticism.

A couple of authorized standard quotations must suffice to pinpoint the fundament of the organic world-view. Coleridge, for example: the difference between an inorganic and organic entity "lies in this: In the first the whole is nothing more than a collection of the individual parts or phenomena," while in the second, "the whole is everything and the parts nothing."[2] Or again

> The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form ... as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened.[3] The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form.[4]

[2] *Philosophical Lectures,* as quoted in M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 171.

[3] As a reminder of how little Whitman feared such "mechanism" see "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, " Section 5, lines 54–64, especially line 62 where his metaphor likens human individuality to a coin "struck" from a molten "float." *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems,* ed. Sculley Bradley et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1980), vol. I, p. 221. All further references to Whitman's poems will indicate this edition by volume and page number.

[4] *Shakespearean Criticism,* as quoted in Abrams, pp. 172–173.

Whitman echoes such commonplaces of Romantic credo with ritual regularity; yet, as I shall show shortly, the poetry he produced would in its most characteristic strategies undermine the fundamental organic presumptions. Inevitably, then, there emerged in our century a tension between the poetry itself and the expectation brought to it by readers trained "organically."

Defenders of the organic mode are in no way limited to readers of Whitman. In the fullness of Western time all the alienating negativities of the "modern" world associated with science, technology, industrialization – mechanism in all its manifestations – could be valiantly opposed under the banner of the "organic" and the "natural." These are the principles that can be counted on to keep art from succumbing to mechanism, civilization from barbarism. In the long run the issues engaged are cosmic and all-inclusive, touching every aspect of Western culture, so it is understandable that organic notions have acquired a heavy emotional investment through the century and a half since Coleridge. That very centrality and persistence of organic loyalties have made it hard to read Whitman for what he does. The way in which we are trained to read has a great deal to do with that because organic reading inevitably expects to find the poetry at hand equally organic.

Everyone likely to read this article has mastered the organic mode of reading – as a precondition of having access to it – so there is no need of an extended abstract description. What is crucial in the present context is that the reader proceeding in this fashion seeks with all the attentiveness and ingenuity available to lay bare the grounds of coherence and unity in the work at hand, no matter how absent or elusive they may seem at first. As long as the work of art is defined as showing an organic unity, then the critic's work is above all to find and to publish it. Criticism written under such an inspiration has a predictable plot: it always has a happy ending (if publishable) because the interpreter *must* conclude by revealing the ultimate organic unity of the whole despite whatever obstacles have barred the way. Otherwise, the critic would, by failing to celebrate organic wholeness, affirm that the work in question does not attain to the stature of art and hence does not deserve to be written about. Thus do our paradigms make parrots of us all.

The most trenchant American commentator on consistency and coherence in literature still seems to me to be Herman Melville, who was long engaged in an intense battle with the issues launched by Coleridge. Here, for example, is an excerpt from Chapter 14 of *The Confi-*

dence-Man (1857), which is entitled: "Worth the Consideration of Those To Whom It May Prove Worth Considering."

> Though there is a prejudice against inconsistent characters in books yet the prejudice bears the other way, when what seemed at first their inconsistency, afterwards, by the skill of the writer, turns out to be their good keeping. The great masters excel in nothing so much as in this very particular. They challenge astonishment at the tangled web of some character, and then raise admiration still greater at their satisfactory unraveling of it; in this way throwing open, sometimes even to the understanding of school misses, the last complications of that spirit which is affirmed by its Creator to be fearfully and wonderfully made.[5]

Leave it to Melville to push our premises to the point where they begin to mock the enterprise itself; but he also shows that it was possible for American writers of the period to disengage themselves at least partially from dominant Romantic notions.

I return to Whitman as my exemplary author in this context partly because organic readings of his work have so often come a cropper. Whitman is loudly a romantic in so many ways, yet his poems continue to upset organic reading expectations just as, for somewhat different reasons, they upset those early readers whose solution to the dilemma was simply to classify his work as not poetry at all. Since that time Whitman's stature as national bard and his pervasive influence on later American poets result in considerable critical-interpretive ingenuity being invested over the last few decades in showing how Whitman's poems are – after all – suitably organic. Whitman is an interesting case because his poetry, from the very outset, has disturbed readers expecting traditional verse. It has similarly troubled critics who sought to contain it within standard organic notions. To them, Whitman is too verbose, too unbuttoned, too barbaric, too inflated, too sprawling, perhaps, to some, too American.

There is not enough space here to review all the questionable interpretations put forward by organic readers of Whitman, but I must cite a few indicative instances from recent commentators who have tried to make sense of his work in such terms. These interpreters are inevitably associated with what used to pass as the *New* Criticism, whether in waxing or waning phase. I want to test three of their major strategies for showing intrinsic unity and coherence in Whitman so as to highlight the resistances characteristic of Whitman's major texts.

[5] Norton Critical Edition, ed. Herschel Parker, p. 59.

The first tactic, represented by three schema, is the attempt to demonstrate unity by sequential logic of segments, a poetic logic akin to narrative in fiction. For simplicity's sake the three examples concentrate on the major poem of *Leaves of Grass* which, as of the 1881 edition, was entitled, "Song of Myself." The basic approach is obvious: if once one could divide the poem into its component parts, as the poet began to do by identifying numbered sections, it should be possible to describe the progression among them, thereby certifying the unity and hence the artistic merit of the whole.

Here are three divergent schematizations of "Song of Myself":[6]

Carl F. Strauch (1938)
Paragraphs 1–18, the Self; mystical interpenetration of the Self with all life and experience
Paragraphs 19–25, definition of the Self; identification with the degraded, and transformations of it; final merit of Self withheld; silence; end of the first half
Paragraphs 26–38, life flowing in upon the Self; then evolutionary interpretation of life
Paragraphs 39–41, the Superman
Paragraphs 42–52, larger questions of life – religion, faith, God, death; immortality and happiness mystically affirmed

Malcolm Cowley (1959)
Chants 1–4: 'the poet or hero introduced to his audience'
Chant 5: 'the ecstasy'
Chants 6–19: 'the grass'
Chants 20–25: 'the poet in person'
Chants 26–29: 'ecstasy through the senses'
Chants 30–38: 'the power of identification'
Chants 39–41: 'the superman'
Chants 42–50: 'the sermon'
Chants 51–52: 'the poet's farewell'

James E. Miller, Jr. (1957)
Sections 1–5: Entry into the mystical state
Sections 6–16: Awakening of self
Sections 17–32: Purification of self
Sections 33–37: Illumination and the dark night of the soul
Sections 38–43: Union (faith and love)
Sections 44–49: Union (perception)
Sections 50–52: Emergence from the mystical state

[6] All three are conveniently reprinted in Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 74–75.

The literary intelligence of the three critics cited here is beyond question, given their insights in other contexts, yet in relation to "Song of Myself" their analyses prove to be mutually defeating. How can this be? Basically, I would contend, because their ingenuity is overmastered by their loyalty to organic reading.

There are two major difficulties with these schemes. First the notions they call on to differentiate segments are not convincing. When Cowley wants Chants 26–29 to epitomize "ecstasy through the senses," he inevitably raises the hackles of readers who find such experience evoked in many parts of the poem. Also the apparent differences implicit in labelling the segments "paragraphs" or "chants" or "sections" offer the thinnest of claims to originality or insight.

Secondly these three schema agree so little on where important transitions occur that their poetic perceptions seem mutually self-cancelling. In particular there is no common agreement as to what constitutes a segment worth characterizing. If Cowley echoes Strauch in relating segments 39–41 to the idea of superman, Miller sees nothing worth pausing over there since the hinges evident to him isolate 38–43 as a subdivision of the poem. Given the cacophony produced by the best of our critics, why not return to Whitman's 52 segments, or even to the divisionless first edition of 1855 where Whitman did everything he could to emphasize flow rather than segmentation? We shall return to this issue shortly, but let us remark here that even when such an interpreter argues insistently for the credibility of his scheme, as in Miller's "inverted mystical experience," his efforts can hardly avoid an aura of special pleading. There are too many exceptions that emerge from the attempt to name any single principle of organic coherence.

Before turning to my alternative approach to Whitman, I want to test rather quickly two further attempts at an organic reading. A second tactic, widely attempted over recent decades, tries to demonstrate artistic coherence by thematic imagery. A single example must suffice, from Thomas Edward Crawley's *The Structure of Leaves of Grass.*

> "In Cabin'd Ships at Sea" anticipates two major symbols which are to act as structural devices in unifying *Leaves of Grass,* the journey-voyage-symbol and the land-sea-symbol. The poem itself, coming early in the volume, cannot be fully appreciated until one is acquainted with the extended use of these two symbols by Whitman: the land represents the material world and mortality, and the journey, man's mundane experience; the sea represents the spiritual world and immortality, and the voyage, man's venture into that

> mystic realm. It is only after we have become aware of Whitman's consistent use of these contrasting symbols in *Leaves of Grass* as unity, that we grasp the full purport and beauty of his thought.[7]

The problems in this particular pursuit of organic unity are not hard to divine: the concepts are either too large or too small, the distinctions unbalanced. The "land-sea-symbol" is so grand and inclusive (mortality and immortality, material and spiritual) that it seems to take in just about everything. Where and why does Whitman insist on any other realms? Either we don't need the counterbalancing notion of "journey-voyage-symbol" or else we must distinguish a large number of particular-instance symbols thereby returning the emphasis back in the direction of Whitman's ongoing flow of items, a process which renders the proffered distinction pointless. The overriding problem of thematic-imagery interpretations remains. These enterprises have shown themselves more loyal to their organic sponsorship than to the poetry.

A third type of organic approach seems more promising. Given the overwhelming diversity of Whitman's materials and concerns, why not focus on *how* he arranges these materials, in hopes of isolating a structural logic of some sort, a consistent set of moves which could be seen as the organic core of his art?

In this context the key issues revolve around Whitman's catalogues, from the outset the most troublesome because least 'organic' elements of his poetry. Gay Wilson Allen reactivates these venerable issues in his *New Whitman Handbook* of 1975 by claiming parallelism as the key notion for describing Whitman's reiterative verse. He proceeds to offer a variety of subcategories derived from biblical scholarship starting with Bishop Lowth in 1753, isolating four basic types of parallelism: synonymous, antithetic, synthetic or constructive, and climactic. Without pausing over the potential contradictions implicit in these terms, I want to concentrate on the hermetic nature of the procedures involved. Thought and style are seen in concord because either one or the other has been used to hypostatize the presence of the other. Allen does not seem to recognize how much he has given away when he says: "Whitman's parallelism, or thought rhythm, is so often accompanied and reinforced by parallel wording and sounds that the two techniques are often almost identical."[8] The basic difficulty in this rhetorical-structural

[7] Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970, p. 85.
[8] p. 224.

approach, as is well pointed out in James Perrin Warren's recent Yale dissertation,[9] is that the concept of thought rhythm and its relation to syntactic parallelism is arbitrary and self-serving. It will not resolve blurred distinctions between thought and sound to insist that the former serves as a basis for defining Whitman's rhythm. The complexity, the variability of the poetry itself defeats easy organicism.

Warren himself goes on to test the notions of phrasal, clausal and mixed catalogues as keys to an organic reading of the poetry, only to find them wanting as well. Loyal to the traditional project, he joins the continuing search for *the* terms which would enable the obligatory organic demonstration to be made. It is worth noting, however, that the more scrupulous the critic, Warren or Lawrence Buell, for example, the greater the tendency to acknowledge that at best the proffered terminology is only approximative, that it must be taken as suggesting tendencies rather then defining "real" poetic entities within Whitman's diversity.

Given the disabling problems plaguing all three of these tactics for organic reading, why not simply abandon the organic project altogether? Lawrence Buell, surely one of the most sane and informed of recent Whitman specialists, makes clear what is at stake: the claim to artfulness itself. In commenting on a catalogue sequence he has just analyzed in such a way as to proclaim its coherence, Buell says:

> This conclusion makes the poem totally open-ended, just as the enumerative technique itself – which Whitman relies on almost exclusively here — is meant to convey the total receptivity of the child; *and yet* this vision is structured in a deliberate and gradual way.[10]

The "yet" signals Buell's reluctant loyalty to organic concepts; by implication "open-ended" would be incompatible with "structured" or simply "artful," though to my way of reading there is no such problem. With a slightly different emphasis Buell can go still further in flirting with a post-organic reading:

> Whitman's primary way of evading mishap in "Song of Myself," however, is not to dally, but like Hart Crane in *The Bridge*, to move so fast through the circuit of forms that no catastrophe can touch him. The spirit triumphs over chaos by sheer energy.[11]

[9] "Walt Whitman's Language and Style," Yale Ph. D., 1982.

[10] *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 173; my italics.

[11] Ibid., p. 186.

Buell, then, despite his willingness to go quite far in acknowledging the risks of "chaos" or near "catastrophe" in Whitman's verse, resists the final step because he still clings to the organic margin. If Whitman's catalogues were to be seen as essentially unpredictable and at least in that sense chaotic, art would seem to have vanished and the poet demoted into a mere wordmonger.

Needless to say, this article is dedicated to the proposition that one can do a better job of describing what is going on in Whitman by abandoning authentication by organic principles. My entry into the poetry will be by way of the reader, but I do not want to abandon the notion of the author. It is crucial to formulate rather precisely just what Whitman's project is and why organic notions are only partially relevant.

Whitman's goal, after all, is to conjoin poetically the nation, all humanity, the cosmos, and his own all-inclusive self, not excluding any intermediate steps along this regal way. His ambition is unbounded and manifestly unattainable: another one of the ALL-projects the Romantics were so fond of, as already hinted by the epigraph to this article. But Whitman is not about to shy away from the grand task just because it is impossible. His artful circumvention will be to invent a fresh way of giving his reader an ALL-feeling based on less than all-encompassing poetic evocation. In short, figuration is called forth, though with an originality so striking that many of his early readers wondered if they were "really" in the presence of poetry or not.

The signal innovation of Whitman's technique is the catalogue, a list of reiterated instances, more or less long, more or less parallel in structure or thematic expression. Since to Whitman every instance of anything must have equal status with every other instance, then quite appropriately the catalogue—implicitly at least—accords equal status to each item. Only in such a way can the parts cohere to form the concordant whole. Unfortunately, however, a world-scale catalogue would be unprintable, unbindable, unsaleable and otherwise unreadable. The trick is to give the illusion of all-inclusiveness without an excess of instantiation. Consider this rather arch remark by Lawrence Buell concerning the tactics of Whitman's catalogue-making:

> It seems that everything moves parallel, nothing moves forward. This suspicion is raised even more strongly by the poetry of Whitman, who cannot sing his "Song of Occupations" [sic] without naming them *all:*
>
> House-building, measuring, sawing the boards,

> Blacksmithing, glass-blowing, nail making, coopering
> tin-roofing, shingles-dressing (lines 103–4)[12]

I can't help imagining Whitman overhearing this remark in his eternal poet's corner, thinking with great satisfaction that he had certainly succeeded this time—he only had to name nine occupations to induce this skilled professional reader to think ALL!

The catalogue, then, must aim at conveying with limited materials a sense of completeness, an inclusiveness that seems implicitly to exhaust whatever universe of discourse is at hand, whatever scale of metaphor, whatever sequence of instantiation. Hence we encounter in "Song of Myself" as elsewhere many examples of two-part totalizing complementarities:

> I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
> The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell
> are with me (Section 21, 11, 421–422)

Such instances are hardly the decisive ones. Much greater problems emerge in the sprawling catalogues that go on for pages—this is where organic presumptions about poetry are pushed beyond their limits. These long catalogues often seem to be composed of mechanically repetitive instances of the same old thing. Herein resides the rhetorical paradox that is at the heart of Whitman's artistic strategy: the reader is supposed to get the feeling that though an infinite number of instances are theoretically available for naming, no significant instance has been excluded. Each catalogue purports to be a microcosm reiterating the cosmic unity of all.

Though the diction Whitman uses to refer to his catalogues is consistently "organic," we can conclude, on inspection, that there is an inescapable element of the arbitrary in every catalogue: arbitrariness as to its length, as to its material, as to its ordering. Arbitrariness implies unpredictability. Indeed in catalogue rhetoric, repetition might be dangerous, but predictability would be fatal. If once the reader sees what the next move is going to be, he can no longer experience the feeling of inclusiveness which is the key to Whitman's project, he can no longer accept this particular list as standing in for all lists and all instances. Hence, to

[12] Buell, p. 166; my italics. See also the variorum edition, I, 93 for the definitive title for the poem and the listing of a few additional occupations.

do its work effectively, a catalogue *must* seem to violate "organic connectedness" as traditionally understood.

To test this proposition I turn to a line from the first edition of "Song of Myself" which I reproduce here in scrambled form. The reason for doing so is to highlight the fully paratactic structure of a catalogue when rhetorical or stylistic cues are not a factor in the ordering of the items. The following misquotation of the line lists its catalogue elements in alphabetical order. Is it possible to reconstitute the original and "organic" order?

We walk the roads of	Charleston	and
	Massachusetts	and
	Mexico	and
	Montreal	and
	New Orleans	and
	New York	and
	Ohio	and
	San Francisco	and
	Savannah	and
	Texas	and
	Virginia	and
	Wisconsin	

I do not mean to suggest that nothing can be said about the ordering of the series; for example, a clever reconstructor might see the special utility of New York as hovering between the two statuses of state and city. But clearly any number of orderings could serve Whitman's purpose equally well. The implications are rather paradoxical: the order chosen could have been different and that reassurance is essential to the catalogue's function in Whitman's world. The arbitrary triumphs over the organic.

The message is akin to Whitman's paradoxical notions of time and history: things could be (or have been) different than they are now, yet there is never anything more or less than what there is now (or was or will be at any future moment). Nonetheless the nineteenth century is the greatest and climatically modern century and the United States is the teeming nation of nations that epitomizes nationhood just as Walt Whitman incarnates the spirit of Poetry. Like not a few others, Whitman wants it ALL ways.

Whitman's catalogue units are separated by what amounts to a conceptual space which the reader must understand as implying: "dear

reader, you don't know where I am going next but be reassured that whatever comes up next will be just as integral and relevant as what came before though at the same time it will be something new and different." The reader may, if he finds a particular sequence or catalogue boring and repetitive, skip ahead, but he will, if continuing to read at all, stop at the next gap to check for new directions or implications. Boredom is sure to emerge if the reader finds only reiteration without hope of advance or change—indeed such is undoubtedly the greatest danger of Whitman's strategy for readers who may be tuned to *Gravity's Rainbow* or the like as a model for unpredictability.

In fact, similar structural issues emerge on higher levels of organization within Whitman's poems. There are blank spaces left between sections, stanzas, or whatever else one might be tempted to call the structural units Whitman marked out for our attention, each one of which engages the reader in essentially the same way. Note also that the same generalizations apply whether we focus on the 1855 edition or the definitive edition(s) finalized by Whitman in 1881.[13]

As a final restatement of my central point, let me assert that it will always be easier for me to show the presence and importance of variation and disruption of predictabilities than for an organicist critic to show consistencies and coherence tied to an inspired or original ordering of poetic elements.

The last range of application of my argument is to Whitman's project itself as it affects his relation to his reader and his notion of readership. All writers are inevitably concerned about the people to whom their wares are offered, but Whitman's concern goes well beyond such commonplaces. The reader is, within Whitman's cosmic scheme, part of a pair of bipolar complementarities which, like all other such pairs, must be united in order to witness to universal connectedness. The split between writer and reader is equivalent to that between man and woman, good and evil, North and South, life and death, past and future, and so on (without justifiable closure to the list). Indeed Whitman has startled many a twentieth-century reader with the uncanny deftness with which

[13] There are, of course, some revisions in the catalogues, but it would take a totally unreconstructed organicist to claim that these modifications change the catalogue or its implications in any significant way. See, for example, section 16 of "Song of Myself" and the comparable lines from the first edition, variorum edition, I, 20–21.

the long-dead poet has already foreseen and foreincorporated the perspective of that as yet unborn reader prefigured by the poet of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." The point is not just to keep the reader reading but to engage his participation in the scheme *qua* reader. Thus Gay Wilson Allen records a previously unpublished statement Whitman first made on his birthday in 1861:

> The paths to the house are made—but where is the house? ... have not *done* the work and cannot do it. But you [the reader] must do the work and *make* what is within the following song [i. e., *Leaves of Grass*].[14]

The crucial emphasis is that *the work* is not conceived of as *the text* but as something made by the reader out of the song which is the poem. Here is another statement, this one very late, in 1888, only three years before the poet's death at the age of 73:

> I round and finish little, if anything; and could not, consistently with my scheme. The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as I have had mine. I seek less to state or display any theme or thought and more to bring you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought—there to pursue your own flight.[15]

The reader's independent flight is presumed, of course, to be equivalent to but not a duplicate of Whitman's originating soar.

Naturally such conceptions are reiterated often within the poetry itself, as is invited by the drive to simulate all-inclusiveness. Thus we find in Section 42 of "Song of Myself":

> I know perfectly well my own egotism,
> Know my omnivorous lines and must not write any less,
> And would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself.

This thrust to fetch the reader along is so strong that it recurs in the very last lines of the poem:

> Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
> Missing me one place search another,
> I stop somewhere waiting for you.
> (Section 52, ll. 1344–1346)

This "somewhere" could, of course, be anywhere since every place is an equivalent part of the whole; hence it is the search itself which will

[14] *New Whitman Handbook*, pp. 68–69; Whitman's italics.
[15] *New Whitman Handbook*, p. 209.

accomplish fetching reader and writer together. There never was any particular place to stop since Whitman cannot imagine grounds for excluding any possibility, or reasons sufficient for preferring any one element over the others.

Every writer may crave a kind of immortality through his readers, but I believe Whitman dares a project more ambitious and tenuous than most. Consider the following lines from the late piece, "So Long!":

> Camerado, this is no book,
> Who touches this touches a man,
> (Is it night? are we here together alone?)
> It is I you hold and who holds you,
> I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls
> me forth.[16]

I believe that this notion of the book as coequal with the man is no mere hyperbole, but a poetic expression of profound importance for understanding Whitman and the limitations of organic concepts for describing his life-long book. Whereas we ordinarily think of people and even poets as having individual selves which they express in their works, Whitman to an extraordinary extent did not possess a stable or recognizable self outside his work, whence the insistent ongoingness of the nine editions of his one book.

Technically speaking, the condition of constantly and self-consciously striving to define a self one can believe in—and confirm by engaging others to believe in—is identified these days as "narcissism."[17] Unfortunately there is not space here for more than a quick sketch of how this psychoanalytic concept may shed light on Whitman's life-writing project.

Whitman cannot produce traditionally "organic" works partly because his "self" is too unstable merely to seek expression in literature; rather, he seeks to *constitute* poetically a self for everyone to believe in. One sign of the narcissistic personality's origins in weakness is that definition of ego boundaries is so weak that it can refuse nothing; every-

[16] Variorum, II, 452.

[17] Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1979) in its early pages gives a useful summary of recent thinking on the subject. Unfortunately Lasch then goes on to psychoanalyze American culture with no more success than Freud achieved when he set out to generalize from the individual psyche to human collectivities. A highly praised recent study is André Green's *Narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort* (Paris: Minuit, 1983).

one and everything must be welcomed, as if to imply that the enterprise is too fragile to risk a negative response from even one fellow being. Everything potentially negative, even Death, must be converted into an ally in order to sustain the project. The process is continuous just as experience is continuous; hence the book must continue as well since new experience demands to be integrated. The Civil War is a crucial testing of national unity, but if also challenges the psycho-poetic project as well. The resulting poems of "Drum-Taps" appear first as appendices to *Leaves of Grass* and only when they are distant enough in the past to diminish their painful threats is the whole reconstituted so as to integrate them fully. By that time there are still more recent and potentially disrupting poetic records of experience that are held at arm's length in an "annex," the term Whitman preferred in his declining years.

Assuming for a moment that I am right to evoke narcissism as characterizing the growth of this poet's mind, then the univalent explanations preferred by organic theories will be particularly inappropriate to account for Whitman's lifework and the evolution of his book. He hoped to complete it, though he could only stop tinkering as he knew his life was drawing to a close. As he said in a letter to Sarah Tyndale dated June 2, 1857, concerning his plan for the third edition:

> It is, I know well enough, that *that* [the 100 poems then projected] must be the *true Leaves of Grass*—and I think it (the new Vol.) has an aspect of completeness, and makes its case clearer. The old poems are all retained. The difference is in the new character given to the mass, by the additions.[18]

In later editions Whitman did leave out or shorten a few of the "old poems" but he never made a better characterization of the essential evolutionary process whereby the new additions changed its character—and his own. As in all cases of narcissism, the drive is toward a sense of completeness in self-definition, but this project is necessarily defeated by continuing experience, leading to a new edition of the self.

Though there is not time for further testing of the explanatory power of narcissism as a concept to explain Whitman, it is important to underline how simplistic organic notions seem in comparison. Whitman and his work can be seen as coherent and comprehensible without recourse to traditional organic ways of reading. In fact, recent reader-oriented

[18] *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence,* ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), vol. I, p. 44.

notions of reading can help us understand this distinctive and elusive American poet more clearly and inclusively than organic readings permitted. We need not pursue deconstructive approaches so far as to abandon the search for coherent explanations, but I have wanted to demonstrate some utility in moving in that direction.