

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 4 (1988)  
  
**Artikel:** Whitman's dream  
**Autor:** Rehder, Robert  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99862>

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## Whitman's Dream

Robert Rehder

The text is *Leaves of Grass*. The context is a dream. Long before he had decided on a career as a poet and long before *Leaves of Grass* took shape, Whitman tells us that he had wanted to write something about the sea-shore as the boundary between formlessness and form and the location of the interaction of phantasy and reality. He writes in *Specimen Days* (1882):

### SEA-SHORE FANCIES

Even as a boy, I had the fancy, the wish, to write a piece, perhaps a poem, about the sea-shore — that suggesting, dividing line, contact, junction, the solid marrying the liquid — that curious, lurking something, (as doubtless every objective form finally becomes to the subjective spirit,) which means far more than its mere first sight, grand as that is — blending the real and ideal, and each made portion of the other. Hours, days, in my Long Island youth and early manhood, I haunted the shores of Rockaway or Coney Island, or away east to the Hamptons or Montauk. Once, at the latter place, (by the old lighthouse, nothing but sea-tossings in sight in every direction as far as the eye could reach,) I remember well, I felt that I must one day write a book expressing this liquid, mystic theme. Afterward, I recollect, how it came to me that instead of any special lyrical or epical or literary attempt, the sea-shore should be an invisible *influence*, a pervading gauge and tally for me, in my composition. (Let me give a hint here to young writers. I am not sure but I have unwittingly follow'd out the same rule with other powers besides sea and shores — avoiding them, in the way of any dead set at poetizing them, as too big for formal handling — quite satisfied if I could indirectly show that we have met and fused, even if only once, but enough — that we have really absorb'd each other and understand each other.)

There is a dream, a picture, that for years at intervals, (sometimes quite long ones, but surely again, in time,) has come noiselessly up before me, and I really believe, fiction as it is, has enter'd largely into my practical life — certainly into my writings, and shaped and color'd them. It is nothing more or

less than a stretch of interminable white-brown sand, hard and smooth and broad, with the ocean perpetually, grandly, rolling in upon it, with slow-measured sweep, with rustle and hiss and foam, and many a thump as of low bass drums. This scene, this picture, I say, has risen before me at times for years. Sometimes I wake at night and can hear and see it plainly.<sup>1</sup>

There are many earlier accounts of dreams, but is there any major author before Whitman who tells us that he has chosen to give his work the *form* of a specific dream, to make it a representation of the unconscious? The dream not only "shaped and color'd" his writings, but also his whole existence, "has enter'd largely into my practical life." Whitman recognizes that to a certain extent his life has been the acting out of this dream. Certainly his haunting of the Long Island shore in his "youth and early manhood" appears as an effort to see his dream come true.

Let us try to interpret this event in the author's inner world. Whitman's dream is an "internal demand . . . replaced by an external experience." The residues of the previous day that retain their cathexes are employed by the unconscious to represent a profound wish of the dreamer.<sup>2</sup> As a recurrent dream it expresses a repeated demand, a continuing wish, the elements of whose representation are particularly strongly cathected. That Whitman chose it consciously as the subject of his book is confirmation of its importance; that he decided it "should be an invisible *influence*" to be shown "indirectly" is additional evidence of its unconscious nature.

This sea-shore presents us with the image of a divided self, of an inner world split between solid and liquid, objective and subjective, real and ideal, and in forming these elements as a single landscape, an integrated scene, the dream is a wish for wholeness. This desire for unity is explicit in the text, in the *contact, junction, marrying* and *blending*, and in Whitman's concern to show that he has *fused* with and *absorb'd* the scene.

If we substitute, as Whitman does in "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," the values of father for the land and mother for the sea, then we have an image of their marrying and merging in which the rustle, rolling,

<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: The Library of America, 1982) 796-7. All citations from Whitman are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud "A Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975) XV, 223-4.

thumps, hiss and foam can be part of a phantasy or memory of sexual intercourse, and the poet's wish is to witness the primal scene, to know about sex and his own origins, as if to know where you came from told you who you are and where you are going — urgent questions in Whitman's poetry.

The sea washing up on the beach is, moreover, an image of birth, of continuous becoming. As a recurrent dream, this is a wish periodically to start over and be whole and innocent again, to re-begin at the beginning so as to re-form some fundamental structure. The compulsion to repeat is the mind's desire to put things right. The "stretch of interminable white-brown sand, hard and smooth and broad" is like a blank sheet of paper.

If we accept this as an account of the origins of Whitman's greatest book, we have not only a statement by the author of the unity of his work, but also a description of its form that relates individual stylistic features to a particular concept of wholeness. Whitman's remarks suggest, in addition, that we need to reconsider our notions of context and at this point I would like to introduce the idea of the inner context.

The work of art is the product of innumerable, specific circumstances. The world, however, acts upon it only indirectly, it acts directly upon the artist; it is the artist that brings the work of art into being. The work of art issues from the artist's consciousness and unconscious — this is the inner context and this is where the work is formed, as a series of choices or decisions made knowingly and unthinkingly by the artist. The process of its creation is only one part of the extremely complicated, unique biochemical process that is the artist's life. The artist separates the work of art from the inner world which involves its disengagement from other bodily processes, and from other possible and incomplete works. The completion of a work of art is at once the conclusion and an interruption of this process of creation. There is, for the artist, a sense in which the work of art is never finished, it continues indefinitely to have its effects, like any other sequence of mental events — thought changes the thinker — although, as can be seen in Whitman's case, even the completion of many poems neither put an end to his sea-shore fancies nor, so it appears, radically altered the basic structure of his inner world. On the contrary, these fancies ensured that *Leaves of Grass* could never be truly finished.

Even as a boy, Whitman tells us, the urge to be present on the dividing line between the solid and the liquid was accompanied by a desire to write about their interaction; merely to witness the marrying was not enough.



For him, the experience required a response, a corresponding activity in himself — the transformation of these sea-shore fancies into an unvarying sequence of symbols. If his feelings are ever-fluid, his poems are the shore. They are of the earth, leaves of grass. Seen in this way, Whitman's poetry is his confrontation of his own amorphousness. His book is to express an everlasting and, at some point, ineffable combinatory activity; it must show process. This implies forms that give the impression of being open to change, a mode of statement that suggests fluidity, a book which has a structure analogous to that of the sea shore.

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) contained what we now refer to as twelve untitled poems, although its original readers could easily have taken it as a long poem in twelve parts, each part separated from the previous one by starting on a new page after a space and a line. This merging of the poems was of Whitman's choosing, as he designed the book and supervised the printing.

Unusually, Whitman, like his contemporary, Baudelaire, is the poet of one book. He conceived of all his poetry as forming a single whole. Every new poem was not simply added, but rather fitted into *Leaves of Grass* and as he wrote more poems, Whitman decided that his book needed more order, a greater unity. This order took over twenty-five years and five editions to impose and has been ignored by most critics. He gave the poems titles and then changed them, often two or three times. He experimented with numbering some of them. He numbered sections of certain poems and for a time numbered their stanzas. He constantly rearranged the order of the poems and in the third edition (1860-61) groups some of the poems in what he calls "clusters."<sup>3</sup> The final order of the clusters was not worked out until 1881 and then probably only because of the pressure of illness and failing health.

These various orders all have in common their asymmetry and their incompleteness; no one idea is applied systematically to all poems. Whitman is the first great poet to make irregularity a principle of form and, in addition, it can be said that his notion of form includes, or allows for, a certain amount of formlessness. His line lengths and stanza lengths

<sup>3</sup> Fredson Bowers, *Textual and Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) 41, but see his whole chapter on the preparation of the third edition, pp. 35-65. Whitman's revisions and re-arrangements can be traced in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, ed. Sculley Bradley and others, 3 vols (New York: New York University Press, 1980).

constantly vary. The stanzas and sections of his poems are usually loosely connected to each other. If some one who did not know *Song of Myself* was presented with the unnumbered sections on separate pieces of paper it is extremely improbable that he would be able to arrange them in anything like Whitman's order. If he was so presented with the stanzas, the improbability would be very much greater and it is also extremely improbable that he would be able to arrange even most of the stanzas in the right sections. This is another way of demonstrating how very personal the poem is, how much it corresponds to its inner context.

The cluster system shows clearly the way in which Whitman's idea of order accommodates a measure of amorphousness. There are 15 clusters in the 1891-2 edition, but 25 unclassified poems, existing in their own right, arranged between clusters and more or less independent of the system, and there is a certain amorphousness within the system in that clusters four to six: "Birds of Passage," "Sea-Drift" and "By the Roadside" denote an unfixed, fluid state.

There is as well an analogous amorphousness at the center of some of Whitman's best poems. The sixth section of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856) creates a discontinuity in the poem's structure. The poet has located himself in the poem between two shores, in the midst of the tidal flow of the East River. He is in the process of crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan, from the past to the future. In section six he interrupts his argument to express his self-doubts and confess his vices. "The best" that he has done seems to him "blank and suspicious." He is one who knows "what it is to be evil." He has "lied, stole, grudg'd, / Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak, / Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant . . ." After this enumeration of anarchic dark feelings, only after he has touched bottom in himself, does Whitman proceed with his crossing.

Similarly, in the second half of the second of the four sections of "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" (1860), Whitman confronts his "real Me" and negates the value of all his work and all his knowledge. Again he makes contact with an inner formlessness. He is nothing: "I have not once had the least idea who or what I am . . . I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single object, and that no man ever can." Here he is as if on the beach of his dream and compares himself and his work to the flotsam and jetsam washed up on the sand by the waves.

Thus, there is a certain formlessness in the structure of *Leaves of Grass*, in the clusters toward the middle of that structure and at the center

of a number of Whitman's best poems. There is a constant tension in his work between feelings of dissolution, merging and ebbing and the world's objects, between the unnameable and naming. "Song of Myself" can be described as a poem without a center or plot, offering no single or clear definition of self and owing its existence to Whitman's inability to offer such a definition, its form a further statement of the amorphousness that Whitman discovers at the center of himself. The poem reveals the urgency of his need for self-definition as well as the necessity of maintaining his capacity for change. The poet is caught between his desire to be on solid ground and to keep moving.

The word *context* has moved from referring only to the inner relations of the text to also denoting its dependence upon some larger whole. Formerly (according to the OED), *context* was the making of the text — "the weaving together of words and sentences" (1432-50), its structure as a set of connected parts (1526), the coherence between its parts (1613), and "the whole structure of a connected passage regarded in its bearing upon any of the parts which constitute it" (1568); the first three meanings are now obsolete, the last, dating from 1568, remains current. What the OED calls the word's figurative use, as if to caution us against its truth value, is recent. Manning (1842) says that we carry "with us from day to day the whole moral context of the day gone by" and Caird (1877) speaks of "the position of facts in the context of experience."

The notion of the unity of each culture is also asserted at this time by E.B. Tylor. "Culture . . . taken in its wide ethnographic sense," he writes in *Primitive Culture* (1871), "is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."<sup>4</sup> The delay in absorbing this idea can be seen in the fact that there is no definition in the OED (1884-1925) of *culture* in this sense. Only in the first supplement (1935) is the meaning given of "the civilization of a people (esp. at a certain stage of its development or history)" with a reference to Tylor's title as its earliest occurrence. The idea, nonetheless, was already implicit in the original edition. Vaguely defined as "a particular form or type of intellectual development," this idea of *culture* is inadequately supported by a citation from Freeman's *Norman Conquest* (1876): "A language and culture which was wholly alien to them," where the usage is that of Tylor.

<sup>4</sup> As cited by Edmund Leach, *Social Anthropology* (London: Fontana, 1982) 38-9.

The coherence, or at least the interdependence, of the man-made world was, however, affirmed much earlier by Shelley who writes in the Preface to *Laon and Cythna* (1817, later *The Revolt of Islam*):

But there must be a resemblance, which does not depend upon their own will, between all the writers of any particular age. They cannot escape from subjection to a common influence which arises out of an infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live though each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his own being is thus pervaded.<sup>5</sup>

This is a comprehensive statement of the literary work's context in the largest sense of the word. As Shelley sees it, this is a unity irrespective of culture. Contemporaneity is all, although presumably the "infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live" would include those elements of the past still active in the present. And Shelley is credited by the OED as the first author to employ *spirit* to denote "The prevailing tone or tendency of a particular period of time." Shelley writes in a letter of 1820: "It is the spirit of the age and we are all infected with it." The next year (1821) Châteaubriand writes in his memoirs: "A toutes les périodes historiques, il existe un esprit-principe."<sup>6</sup> Hazlitt publishes *The Spirit of the Age* in 1825 — and significantly, from our point of view, it is a series of portraits of his contemporaries. The existence of this spirit is a matter of the character of individuals.

There is a sense in which Wordsworth is the first to map the inner world. He is radically more self-conscious than any author before him. His revolutionary act is to write the history of his own consciousness. "The Mind of Man," he tells us in *Home at Grasmere* is "My Haunt and the main region of my song."<sup>7</sup> From 1798 on, most of the best poems are explicitly an exploration of the life of the mind. Although it is only with

<sup>5</sup> P. B. Shelley, *Shelley's Prose*, ed. David Clark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1966) 318.

<sup>6</sup> R.-A. de Châteaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, ed. Maurice Levaillant et Georges Moulinier (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1946) I, 148.

<sup>7</sup> MS D, lines 793-4; William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*, ed. Beth Darlington (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) 103. For this view of Wordsworth, see Robert Rehder, *Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* (London: Croom Helm, 1981).

the work of Freud that we have a comprehensive scientific description of the workings of the inner context, the concept is partially stated by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his *Ueber die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers* read to the Prussian Academy in 1821, the same year in which Châteaubriand writes of the "esprit-principe" and the year before Hegel delivers his first lectures on history. The historian's task, says von Humboldt, is to discover the "inner causal nexus" of events, "the invisible part of every fact." This search for "the necessity of events" depends on realizing "the breath of life in the whole and the inner character which speaks through it which can be neither measured nor merely described." "Everything which is active in world history," he states, "is also moving within the human heart. . . . all occurrences are inseparably linked in space and time."<sup>8</sup> This is the thinking that produces the usage of *context* in the citations from Manning and Caird.

According to this expanded meaning of the word, the context is everything beyond the text, with the implication, or at least the suggestion, that the context has a coherence analogous to that of the text. The same suggestion is made by our topic, reading contexts. This raises a number of questions: do we read contexts? is reading a model for all interpretation? is language a model for all meaning, for all order — and order no more than another name for meaning? Let us look again at our two entities.

The text is a circle, the context everything outside that circle; texts are homogeneous, contexts heterogeneous. The text is a deliberate creation, the context as such is not. Texts have clearly defined limits, are arranged to be read in a particular order and are composed in languages, shared symbolic systems consisting of a very limited number of signs — and they have authors. The context of any given text is unlimited, does not seem to need to be interpreted in any particular order, is composed of events and does not have a single author.

From this a number of things follow:

- 1) Every text has the same context: the whole of human history — up to the moment of its completion. Any selection is to a certain extent arbitrary and risks excluding material necessary for the solution of the

<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, "On the Historian's Task," *History and Theory*, VI (1967) 58, 59, 65.



problem for which it has been made. For practical purposes, the context of *Leaves of Grass* is European culture. To answer questions about the nature of poetry or literary form it is clearly necessary to consider literatures of different cultures, and it may be, for example, that the history of English literature is not long enough for us to grasp the principles of literary development.

2) The context acts upon the text through the agency of the author. This is the only way that events have of gaining access to the text.

The desire for mastery causes us to try to isolate the text, to insist on its independence and self-sufficiency and while this can help us to see more clearly exactly what a text says, beyond certain limits it is a falsification, a denial of reality. This desire to remove the text from history is also a defence against the power of literature to change us, to force us willy-nilly to confront our own inner worlds. (This is, I believe, the motive of all very rigid, formal and abstract criticism. Structuralism is a cage for tigers.) There can be, however, no real escape, because literature is *about* human behaviour, because it is composed in languages, made of signs that refer to its context, to human history and personal experience, rich with the associations of previous referrals.

3) The analysis of contexts is a historical study, its subject is always past events — and change. This poses the problem of the relation between literary and non-literary events — what, for example, is the relation between the development of physics after Oested's discovery of electromagnetism (1820) and that of poetry? This question like that (equally difficult?) of the relation between the development of the novel and poetry in this period, like all historical questions, can only be answered in terms of individuals, and fully answered in terms of the inner context.

Central to the action of Balzac's *Ursule Mirouët* (1841), is the visit in Paris of the sceptical Dr. Minoret to a mysterious disciple of Mesmer who through his mastery of the powers of magnetism is able to tell him where his money is hidden in his house in Nemours, what is happening there in his absence and the private thoughts of his god-daughter, Ursule. The episode is introduced by a short disquisition on Mesmer and his theories as if they were the most momentous new scientific discoveries. The events of the story, as often happens in *La Comédie humaine*, are explicitly



situated in relation to the history of science. Toward the end of the novel Balzac uses an item of electrical apparatus to describe a movement by the sensitive Ursule:

Ursule eut un petit tresaillement nerveux qui fit frissonner l'abbé Chaperon comme s'il avait reçu la décharge d'une bouteille de Leyde . . .<sup>9</sup>

Like Balzac, Hawthorne in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) uses science to intensify the power of phantasy and to shade gradually from the natural to the supernatural. Clifford, in his flight from the house gets into an argument with an "old gentleman" on the train. "Mesmerism, now!" he declares, is the harbinger of a better era, and when the old gentleman rejects this as humbug, he adduces the example of rapping spirits to show how "the door of substance . . . shall be flung wide open."

Then there is electricity; — the demon, the angel, the mighty physical power, the all-pervading intelligence! . . . Is that a humbug, too?<sup>10</sup>

Whitman in the fifth poem of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* asserts that "those I love . . . will not let me off till I . . . charge them full with the charge of my soul." This poem which Whitman called "Poem of The Body" in 1856 and "Enfans d'Adam" in 1860 becomes in 1867: "I Sing the Body Electric." In the versions of "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," from 1866 to 1871 the poet musing on the beach is "held by the eternal self of me," but in 1876 this is changed to "this electric self."

Electricity which was no more than a scientific curiosity in 1800 captured the imagination of authors soon after it captured those of scientists. This invisible force was appropriated by writers in order to describe the kinetic presence of psychic and emotional energies, to make them more real, more palpable. The laws of its existence and the apparatus that it made possible (such as the Leyden jar) were used to model the mind and the flow and transmission of feeling. Whitman's remarks interpreting the sea-shore suggest what happened in this case — and the general rule: the concept of electricity becomes a metaphor,

<sup>9</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, ed. Marcel Bouteron (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1952) III, 431.

<sup>10</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Novels*, ed. Millicent Bell (New York: The Library of America, 1968) 578.

which is what happens, directly or indirectly, completely or vestigially, to every event of perception, every object of thought.

The mind continually converts the things of this world to language. The past is being constantly relived in the day dream of perception, as we struggle to find ourselves in our personal histories and free ourselves from them. From the examples, it is clear that the appeal of electricity as an idea is that it relates the unseen to the seen, connecting the outer and inner worlds and offering the possibility of a more detailed representation of mental events. The establishment of such a relation is of the very nature of metaphor, which by its structure asserts the identity of unlike things and incorporates an absent other in a present object. To say that all art is metaphor not only recognizes the fundamental nature of this combinatory power, but also indicates a notion of wholeness: that the work of art is the equivalent of some inner state or object. This is explicit in Whitman's account of his dream, while his knowledge of what he is doing is indicative of the radical increase in self-consciousness that occurs in European culture after Wordsworth and that results so often in poetry becoming the subject of the poem.

4) The author is affected both by events of which he is unaware and by events, known and unknown, that occurred before he was born. The idea of the inner context includes all memories and allows for the operation of unconscious forces while locating their activity within the psyches of particular persons. As far as we know, except for the forces of nature, there are no impersonal historical forces. The inertia of man-made structures can always be referred to specific persons. The ethos of a culture is in the minds of its members. The zeitgeist begins and ends as a matter of the psychology of individuals.

Why did Whitman create *Leaves of Grass* in a new irregular form? Why did he choose to abandon the old conventions of regularity? What is the relation of this choice to his idea of the United States as "the amplest poem," his many references to democracy and his concern with American politics:

The haughty defiance of the Year One, war, peace, the  
formation of the Constitution,  
The separate States, the simple elastic scheme, the  
immigrants, . . .

Congress convening every Twelfth-month, the members duly  
coming up from the uttermost parts. . . .<sup>11</sup>

Hugo in "Réponse à un acte d'accusation" (1834) compares his poetic activity to the French Revolution. He declares: "J'ai pris et démolì la bastille des rimes."<sup>12</sup> Whitman's feelings about form are somewhat similar, except that Hugo's poem is in alexandrines and rhymed couplets, and Whitman's poems in what he calls his "new free forms." Whitman makes his own rules. He is "the president of regulation."<sup>13</sup> He feels free enough to encourage others not to copy him, but rather to follow his example: "He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher." Whitman establishes the traditions of the new, the convention of constantly separating oneself from the past.

O lands, would you be freer than all that has ever been  
before?  
If you would be freer than all that has been before, come  
listen to me.<sup>14</sup>

Every poem is to be as new as the newest wave breaking on the shore.

The irregularity, asymmetry and idiosyncrasy of Whitman's forms flow from his sense of the uniqueness of each of the world's objects, beginning with himself. This idea of form implies a certain lack of connectedness, of relation, between things; it refers to the inner context and denotes a conception of the self. The assumption is of the individuality of every thing: each poem must have its own distinctive form because it is the unique statement of a unique person.

This feeling of individuality has a long history in European culture and is associated with a variety of notions of liberty that manifest themselves with particular force after around 1750. Voltaire, in taking up the case of Jean Calas, illegally executed by the authorities of Toulouse by being broken on the wheel for the murder of his son (who committed suicide), marks the connection between the outer and the inner context. He writes in a letter (15 April 1762) that the event "appartient essentiellement à

<sup>11</sup> Whitman, pp. 471, 472-3.

<sup>12</sup> Victor Hugo, *Oeuvres poétiques*, ed. Pierre Albouy (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1967) II, 498-9

<sup>13</sup> Whitman, pp. 14, 10.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 242, 470.

l'histoire de l'esprit humain." To the Calas family lawyer he writes (11 June 1762) of the officials who ordered the execution: "Les cruels! ils ont oublié qu'ils étaient hommes."<sup>15</sup> What is emerging is a new conception of what it is to be a human being.

There is a new respect for the person, a new sense of the individual life as an entity and a new conception of human rights and responsibilities that informs the whole of the *Encyclopédie* (1751-1759), Cesare Beccaria's *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764) and the campaign against slavery whose first major victory was Lord Mansfield's decision (22 June 1772) that if a slave sets foot on British soil, he is free. This was not a matter of a few isolated thinkers. Besterman states: "it can plausibly be maintained that by his activity in the Calas case Voltaire created public opinion as a new and increasingly weighty factor in the life of a civilised community."<sup>16</sup> The *Encyclopédie* was reprinted in relatively cheap editions for more than twenty years after its completion. Beccaria's work which advocated a uniform, democratic justice and opposed judicial torture and capital punishment was translated into every major European language by 1800 and has been called "perhaps the greatest and most influential work of the Enlightenment."<sup>17</sup> The opposition to slavery was strong enough that the House of Commons voted to make buying and selling slaves a felony in 1811 in the middle of the war with Napoleon when "every sailor from Nelson downwards declared that its abolition would be the ruin of the British Navy."<sup>18</sup>

The year in which Voltaire took up the Calas case (1762), John Wilkes began to edit the newspaper, *The North Briton*. His opposition (1762-1780) to George III's efforts to establish himself as an absolute monarch (following his mother's advice: "George, be King") was the focus of discontent in Britain.<sup>19</sup> Wilkes and his followers caused the courts to declare general warrants illegal (1769) and won the right to publish parliamentary debates in the newspapers (1771). They organized the first political campaign, held the first political public meetings and brought forward the then radical idea that constituents could instruct their

<sup>15</sup> Voltaire, *L'Affaire Calas* (Paris: Nouvel Office d'Édition, 1963) 44, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976) 466.

<sup>17</sup> Olwen Hufton, *Europe: Privilege and Protest 1730-1789* (London: Fontana, 1980) 91.

<sup>18</sup> H. A. L. Fisher, *A History of Europe* (London: Edward Arnold, 1942) 1032.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Postgate, *"That Devil Wilkes"* (London: Constable, 1930) 15.

representatives.<sup>20</sup> As Sheriff of London, Wilkes, in 1772, recommended (with his colleague) the "revision of those laws which inflict capital punishment for many inferior crimes," and reported: "It was our care, while we paid due obedience to the laws now in force, to alleviate their harshness by lenity and tenderness to every unhappy object."<sup>21</sup> The new democracy was a new humanity. Whitman praises Tom Paine for his contribution to the United States' "ardent belief in, and substantial practice of, radical human rights."<sup>22</sup>

The American and French Revolutions are only the best-known examples of the revolutionary agitation that occurred throughout Europe at this time. There were revolutions, successful and unsuccessful, in Poland (1794), Hungary (1794) and the Netherlands (1794-5), in Milan (1796), Naples (1798) and Rome (1799), in Switzerland and in Ireland (1798). Burke "when he died in 1797 was so afraid of invasion and revolution in England that he gave orders for his remains to be secretly buried" so that they could not be dug up and desecrated by triumphant democrats. Fichte stated in 1799 that "only the French Republic can be considered by the just man as his true country."<sup>23</sup>

The ideas for which these revolutions were argued and fought together constitute a new notion of individuality and effect a liberation of feeling. This includes such ideas as free trade (advocated after about 1760 by Quesnay, Mirabeau and Smith). *Laissez-faire* is a motto for all behaviour — as is every idea. Ideas are never limited to their declared subjects. This is their power. They continuously transform themselves and everything they touch. Such is the lesson of the inner context. Wilke's licentious private life is not an accident. He thought Boswell's statement (in *An Account of Corsica*), "better occasional murders than frequent adulteries" the most unreasonable aphorism he had ever read.<sup>24</sup> His open-handed carelessness about money and his personal courage are of a piece with his sexual mores and his political convictions. As he lay painfully, and as he believed mortally, wounded in Hyde Park after his duel with Samuel Martin, Wilkes' first thought was to urge Martin not to help him, but to

<sup>20</sup> Postgate, 174; George Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962) 191-198.

<sup>21</sup> Postgate, pp. 209-10.

<sup>22</sup> Whitman, p. 798.

<sup>23</sup> R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959) I, 5-6.

<sup>24</sup> Postgate, p. 109.



escape immediately so as not to be arrested.<sup>25</sup> Another instance of *laissez-faire* is the work of de Sade, an assertion of sexual freedom, as is, in its very different way, *Leaves of Grass*. The French Revolution released phantasies of all kinds and the same is true of Whitman's poetic revolution.

All of these events in the outer context need to be considered if we are to understand Whitman's conception of self, the democracy of objects in his poetry, his toleration of his own amorphousness, his freedom of speech and "new free forms." Whitman's interest in American politics is an instinctive concern for the sources of his power. The references to the American system of government in his poetry (like all references in poetry) have the value of metaphor. The outer context contains the inner and is in a symbiotic relation with it. The cumulative power of events in both contexts is manifest in the development of language. The Danish grammarian, Otto Jespersen, observes that where "the logic of facts . . . is at war with the logic of grammar, English is free from the . . . pedantry which in most languages sacrifices the former to the latter or makes people shy of writing things which are not 'strictly grammatical'." This freedom to choose reality Jespersen relates to other freedoms: "The English language would not have been what it is if the English had not been for centuries great respecters of the liberties of each individual and if everybody had not been free to strike out new paths for himself."<sup>26</sup> This is the difference between Hugo and Whitman.

The article "Nécessaire" that Voltaire added in 1765 to his *Dictionnaire philosophique* is a dialogue between two Turks. Osmin asks: "Are there any notions common to all men that help them to live together in a society?" Yes, replies Sélim, everywhere that I have travelled:

j'ai vu qu'on respectait son père et sa mère, qu'on se croyait obligé de tenir sa promesse, qu'on avait de la pitié pour les innocents opprimés, qu'on détestait la persécution, qu'on regardait la liberté de penser comme un droit de la nature, et les ennemis de cette liberté comme les ennemis du genre humain.<sup>27</sup>

This is the new spirit: that one feels for the oppressed as one respects one's parents, that one means what one says and that freedom of thought

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>26</sup> Otto Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, (Garden City, Doubleday, 1955) 14, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Paris: Garnier - Flammarion, 1964) 301.



is as primary as filial feeling, not only a right of nature, but also a necessity of the species.

These ideas formed Whitman's world. They freed the dreamer. They enfranchised the poet. He made, as a result, *Leaves of Grass* a poetic Declaration of Independence so that, as he says in the first of his anonymous self-reviews (1855): "The interior American republic shall also be declared free and independent."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Walt Whitman, *The Critical Heritage*, ed. Milton Hindus (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) 34.