Walt Whitman and Beauty

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Chapter ONE;

INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman and Beauty

A child said, <u>What is the grass?</u> fetching it to me with full hands... I guess it must be the flag of my disposition out of hopeful green stuff woven...¹

It was from this "green stuff" of nature that. Whitman wanted to get images for his <u>Leaves of Grass</u> and into which he intended to turn his poems. From this "hopeful green stuff" Whitman's esthetic theory grew.

Whitman's esthetic theory contains two principles of interest to this paper: Whitman's belief that art was not intended for its sake alone; from which came his professed scorn of beauty. The second principle was his belief in indirect expression, a form he saw as being nearest to nature. These two principles are important to this study because Whitman's professed scorn of beauty forces the question as to what role beauty played in Whitman's literary work. The principle of indirect expression offers the clue and possible answer.

The source material for this paper obviously comes from two major sources, Whitman's own writings and those of his commentators and critics. For specific expressions of Whitman's experience of beauty,

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this paper depends on Whitman's <u>Leaves of Grass</u> and <u>Specimen Days</u>. For an understanding of his esthetic theory, more emphasis is placed on his essays and prefaces and on parts of <u>Specimen Days</u>. Of special interest are his 1855 preface, his essays "Democratic Vistas," "Poetry To-day in America--Spakespere--The Future," "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," and his essay on criticism.

Commentators and critics who offer the most important and revealing material for this paper are: Ezra Pound in his essay "The Open Road," D.H. Lawrence in the Whitman chapter of his book <u>Studies in Classic</u> <u>American Literature</u>, P.W.B. Lewis in his essay, "The New Adam: Whitman" and, finally, several of Gay Wilson Allen's biographical works. It was through these commentators and critics and from the common feeling that people of Whitman's time had for his book, that the intuitions were formed as to how Whitman generally functioned and, specifically to this paper, what value and role beauty played in his career.

Delving into Whitman's <u>Leaves of Grass</u> and comparing comments with his own words and the records he kept of his life experiences laid the foundations for studying his esthetic approach; then came a clearer vision of what part beauty played in Whitman's work. In the end, his general and particular experiences of beauty could be presented.

Ezra Pound, as a commentator in chapter two, suggests the first clue as to Whitman's relationship to beauty, and H.C. Merwin's article

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"Millet and Walt Whitman," the first idea as to how important a role nature was to play in Whitman's understanding and use of beauty in his literature. The last chapter of D.H. Lawrence's book Studies in Classic American Literature, adds the final ingredient to a finer understanding of Whitman and beauty; that ingredient is morality. Nature and morality, and Whitman's understanding of both, give a necessary key to just how Whitman related to the idea of beauty as well as to how he was to experience it. The commentators coming after Lawrence interest themselves in the style aspects of Whitman's literature, especially in the area of his borrowing from the ideas of the 1850 romantics and with his constant refusal to imitate the diction and manners of these same contemporaries. In 1968 the commentators seem to swing from a, study of his style to a psychological analysis of Whitman's literature. Edwin Hairlan Miller reflects, in his book Walt Whitman's Poetry, that all of Whitman's poetry basically originates in the unconscious and from infantile sources. Something Gay Wilson Allen resuggests with the added idea that Whitman was protesting the damage done by cultural rejection of infantile sensuousness. The importance of the commentators and critics to this paper's method is that they offer the possibility of developing a clearer understanding of an esthetic theory Whitman only vaguely discussed in his prose.

Chapters three and four compare Whitman's prose and poetry to the ideas already suggested by the commentators and critics. Chapter three searches Whitman's literary works for insights into Whitman's rational

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understanding of his esthetic theory. William James and his book, <u>The Varieties of Religious Experience</u>, used in both chapters, is helpful in discovering the definite importance of nature and morality in Whitman's relationship to beauty, as is Jacques Maritain, and Collins' book, <u>A History of Modern European Philosophy</u>. Chapter four, like chapter three,roots its information in Whitman's works, dealing particularly with his experiences of beauty. It is also an example of Whitman's belief in the idea of indirect expression.

Chapter five collects the ideas of the earlier chapters and concludes the paper. These important points are made: It was in nature and his understanding of morality that Whitman recognized the beautiful; and, therefore, his appreciation of beauty is cast in a very tradional manner. It is also because of his professed scorn of the romantic jargon of his time that he saw and spoke of beauty in and through his idea of indirect expression. This basically is the method of this paper.

Chapter TWO:

The Critics and Commentators

Me imperturbe, standing at ease in Nature, Master of all or mistress of all, aplomb in the midst of irrational things, Imbued as they, passive, receptive, silent as they, Finding my occupation, poverty, notoriety, foibles, crimes...less important than I thought...

Me wherever my life is lived, 0 to be self-balanced for contingencies, To confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs, as the trees and animals do.²

"O to confront ridicule, and rebuffs, as Nature does," seems to be one of the more important of Whitman's wishes in this poem. The idea became important to him because of the storm his literary career weathered and because of all he had to endure after his initial steps in 1855.

It seems that in June of 1865, Whitman was discharged from his employment on account of the unsavory reputation of his <u>Leaves</u>. In 1876, a transatlantic controversy was begun between the English press and the press in the United States over America's neglect of Whitman. In 1882, James R. Osgood, under pressure of prosecution by the district attorney's office in Boston, refused to print any further copies of <u>Leaves of Grass</u> until the poems, "To a Common Prostitute," and, "A Woman Waits for Me," were expurgated. J.A. Symond, two years before Whitman's death, wrote an apparently stinging interpretation of Whitman's "Calamus" poems, an interpretation that won for him an angry letter from Whitman himself. That

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letter contains the mysterious and revealing claim that Whitman had fathered six illegitimate children.

In spite of occasional persecution and the fact that he was ignored by the general public of his time, Whitman did have a few followers and some favorable comments about his literary efforts. A few people saw and admitted the beauty of his book, and, more importantly, there were even a few who saw beauty with the same vision with which he saw it. Such sympathizers, as well as the critics of Walt Whitman, deserve attention in this study, but specifically those that can shed some light on Whitman's relationship to beauty.

Henry D. Thoreau wrote a letter to H.G.O. Blacke in which he states that, after reading the 1856 edition of <u>Leaves of Grass</u>, Thoreau found the book rude and at times ineffectual, but it reminded him strongly of the literature of the Orient, and that it was a great and primitive poem.³ At the same time Thoreau was writing his letter, a magazine called <u>The Christian Spiritualist</u> was preparing an article citing <u>Leaves of Grass</u> as a transition from "the diseased" mentalities of the past to a new and purer "spirit life." The article came out in the face of heavy opposition and the suppression of Whitman's book in Boston.⁴

In 1868, William M. Rossetti printed in England <u>Poems of Walt</u> <u>Whitman</u>, a copy of selected and expurgated poems. A year later a certain Mrs. Ann Gilchrist read Rossetti's edition of <u>Leaves of Grass</u> and

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wrote Rossetti a letter, part of which reads: "Poets fancying themsleves so happy over the chill and faded beauty of the past...But this poet...takes you by the hand and turns you with your face straight forward."⁵ In fact, the widowed Mrs. Gilchrist was so taken by Whitman's poems that she wrote Whitman a love letter two years later, and in 1871 she moved her family from England to Philadelphia, across the river from where Whitman was living in New Jersey. She returned to England in 1879, after a valiant but futile attempt at wedding Whitman to herself.

Gerard Manly Hopkins was also to face the lash of public opinion and Jesuit censorship for his similar use of free verse in his poetry. In fact he was to be accused of copying Whitman's style--an accusation he denied, admitting only a similarity. In a letter to Robert Bridges, Hopkins wrote of Whitman: "His savage style has advantage and he has chosen it...Neither do I deny all resemblance..."⁶ This serves as a reminder of the prophetic and descriptive line from Whitman's "Song of Myself": "I sound my barbaric yawps over the roofs of the world."⁷

Five years after Whitman's death, H.C. Merwin, writing for the <u>Atlantic'</u> magazine, entered an article entitled, "Millet and Walt Whitman." Whitman had viewed some Millet paintings in 1881 and recorded the experience in a note book that he later edited with others, and published as <u>Specimen Days</u>. Based on this experience, Merwin wrote his article, comparing the personalities of the two men. Merwin wrote that Whitman was the only author in the United States, or Europe, who

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had perceived what democracy really meant, and that Whitman was one of the few artists who appreciated "the beauty and the heroism which are found in the daily lives of the common people."⁸ In comparing Millet and Whitman, Merwin writes, "Both were of strong physique and large frame and both grew up with an intense love of nature and of solitude."⁹--a love that suggests the theme for the next two chapters of this study.

Ezra Pound, commenting on Whitman's poem "The Open Road," wrote in an essay dated February 1, 1909, that although he was as immortal as Whitman, he was himself being so with less vitality. Less vitality, Pound writes, because he was more in love with beauty than Whitman. Then, correcting himself, he writes in parenthesis, "(If I really do love it more than he did.)"¹⁰ He continues his comments by saying that he would like to "drive" Whitman into the old world, and to "drill" and "scourge" the United States with all the "old beauty."

In 1923, D.H. Lawrence published a book called <u>Studies in Classic</u> <u>American Literature</u>, at the end of which appears an essay on Whitman. In it Lawrence comments on one of Whitman's basic literary thrusts. He writes that although the essential function of art is moral, it is a function that must deal with a passionate and implicit morality and must not be didactic: "A morality which changes the blood, rather than the mind. Change the blood first. The mind follows later, in the wake."¹¹ Lawrence says Whitman was such a moralist, the first of all the great

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writers of the American continent to break completely with the old morality and found: "A doctrine of life. A new great morality. A morality of actual living, not of salvation."¹²

F.O. Matthiessen and Frederick J. Hoffman touch upon Whitman's idealism and romantic tendency. In 1941, Matthiessen wrote, in an article entitled "Only a Language Experiment":

Whitman's response to...idealism was more than fleeting, as we may judge from his marginal note on an unidentified essay on "Immagination and Fact,"...The sentence that struck the poet reads: "The mountains, rivers, forest and the elements that gird round about would be only blank conditions of matter if the mind did not fling its own divinity around them." Whitman commented: "This I think is one of the most indicative sentences I ever read."

Frederick J. Hoffman, in his "The Technological Fallacy in Contemporary Poetry," comments on "To a Locomotive in Winter":

The force of this poem depends on its being, as it is, everything to the heart and nothing to the intellect.

One is led to a further reflection: can it be said that the consolation by contradiction that governs this poem epitomizes a basic pattern of romantic feeling in America?¹⁴

This idea of "consolation by contradiction" mentioned by Mr. Hoffman, is one of the many contemporary romantic ideas Whitman absorbed into his aesthetic feeling. However, John Kinnaird, in 1958, wrote that no matter how indebted Whitman was to the existing romantic tradition for his ideas of "consolation by contradiction" and his messianic image of poet-prophet, Whitman knew that he could never adapt the manner and diction of contemporary romanticism to the expressive and vast needs of his kosmos. In agreement with D.H. Lawrence, Kinnaird writes further that the demands of Whitman's work were such that they proved revolutionary enough to overthrow in the English literary culture, the pious notion of poetry as the ritual of an absolute "Protestant Good" and its "ministering angel," beauty.¹⁵

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Agreeing with Kinnaird, Charles Feidelson, Jr., in his essay on Whitman's symbolism, wrote that Whitman not only translated symbolism into allegory but also affected a rational style that tied his language to a common-sense world; suggesting that Whitman's looseness of form constituted an intellectual anarchism designed to overthrow conventional reality.¹⁶ Feidelson's remarks suggests the important point that though Whitman saw his kosmos in need of a vast expression, he was able to avoid the romantic language of his time, by his ability to tie his style to "a common-sense world."

Roger Asselineau wrote that in spite of Whitman's growing respect for art, he saw convention a dangerous artifice and discipline a useless constraint. Whitman contrasted art with what he called simplicity or a strict adherence to nature. Because of this strict adherence to nature, Asselineau saw mysticism in Whitman's literary method, which he claimed was caused by Whitman's life experience.¹⁷

With Asselineau, Lawrence, Feidelson, and Kinnard, P.W.B. Lewis

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in his article, "The New Adam: Whitman," wrote,

It is in fact, in the poems gathered under the title "Children of Adam" (1860) that we have the most explicit evidence of his ambition to reach behind tradition to find and assert nature untroubled by art, to re-establish the natural unfallen man in the living hour.¹⁸

Again in 1955, another article appeared called "The Shaping of American Character." It was written by a Perry Miller. The article is intended to be a comment on Whitman's place in shaping the American character. The lines in the article important to this paper, deal with the removal of a sentence from Whitman's "By Blue Ontario's Shore," the removal of which exposes Whitman's conscious effort to restrain references to beauty in his writings.

In 1856 and 1860...one line of "By Blue Ontario's Shore" had gone, "Give me to speak beautiful words! take all the rest." In 1867 this became "Give me to sing the song of the great Idea!. take all the rest."¹⁹

This comparison in Mr. Miller's article, especially indicates Whitman's scorn of the contemporary understanding of beauty. It also facilitates a better understanding that though Whitman stayed clear of the romantic style in language, he did not remain at a distance from contemporary romantic "Ideas."

William Carlos Williams wrote in "An Essay on <u>Leaves of Grass</u>" that Whitman's free verse "was an assault on the citadel" of verse itself. Williams also made the cryptic remark that verse could not be free without being immoral. This seems similar to what Lawrence, Asselineau, Feidelson and the others had already said about Whitman establishing a new moral order.

In 1958, Richard Chase suggested that it is not out of literary intricacy that one reads Whitman, but to arrive at a steady appreciation of Whitman's simplicity.²⁰ Chase does not make clear nor even proves the existence of Whitman's "simplicity."

In 1959, Walter Sutton commenting on Whitman's interest in "organic unity," writes that, like Cooleridge, Whitman regarded rime and meter as superficial, and that this in part was why Whitman could effectively work with universals and his favored "ensemble."²¹

The preceding critics seem more or less, to develop their theories along the lines of literary analysis. In the late Sixties and the Seventies psychoanalysis is introduced.

Edwin Hairlan Miller in his book <u>Walt Whitman's Poetry</u> (1968), reflects on the fact that Whitman's poetry is both lyrical and autobiographical in nature, and that Whitman's self-examination has its origins in the unconscious and is of infantile sources. Miller says that the tensions of Whitman's poems, therefore, are psychic, with an inner drama that has an inevitable progression toward resolution and release. A year later Gay Wilson Allen in his biographical work writes that Whitman intended in his "Song of Myself," a protest against the human and emotional damage caused by culturally imposed rejection of

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tactility and infantile sensuousness.²² Sigmund Freud in his book <u>Moses</u> and Monotheism, writes,

Infantile feelings are far more intense and inexhaustibly deep than are those of adults; only religious ecstasy can bring back that intensity.²³

Roger Asselineau suggests that Whitman experienced mystic ecstasies through what Merwin and Lawrence and the other commentators, to one degree or another, called his love of nature and what he understood to be the morality of nature. This religious experience will be studied more in the next two chapters.

Chapter two concludes on these two important points: through nature and morality Whitman was able to see beauty; and by the use of indirect expression was Whitman able to express the beauty he saw.

Chapter THREE

Whitman's Rational Feeling for Beauty

The fatal defects our American Singers labor under are subordination of spirit, an absence of the concrete and of real patriotism, and in excess that modern aesthetic contagion a queer friend of mine calls the beauty disease. 'The immoderate taste for beauty,' says Charles Baudelaire, 'leads men into monstrous excesses. In minds imbued with a frantic greed for the beautiful, all the balances of truth and justice disappear. There is a lust, a disease of the art faculties, which eats up the moral like a cancer.'²⁴

This foot-note to Whitman's "Poetry Today In America--Shakespeare--The Future," written by himself, introduces to us Whitman's lifelong intellectual embrace of art as a means of defining the desire that had been flitting through his previous life and which finally dominated everything else: the desire to express in poetic form, uncompromisingly, his physical, emotional, moral, intellectual and aesthetic "Personality"--admitting to himself and to his reader that there are themes that are usually controlling factors in literature, such as war, religious rapture, love, beauty, or a fine plot and seemed endlessly appropriated to poets. But he says that, as strange as it may sound at first, there is something striking far deeper and towering higher than these themes and this strange something shall be the best element in modern song.²⁵

As one reads Whitman, it becomes evident that the "strange something" of Whitman's modern song, is nothing more than the greatest and long-lived ideas and ideals of civilization in regard to art and beauty. When Whitman writes in his 1855 preface that the new breed of poets shall not define perfection or beauty, but express the inexpressible; he is suggesting little less than the traditional idea that beauty is indefinable.²⁶ This "strange something" of modern poetry also suggests Whitman's romantic distaste for pinning anything down and, therefore, his having never developed a satisfactory aesthetic theory of beauty; although his writings show he had a feeling for, and understanding of, the existing ones, especially in regard to the roles of nature and morality. Chapter three will use the tools of nature and morality, so important to Whitman, to discover the role beauty played in Whitman's experience and literary work.

He wrote in "Poetry Today In America -- Shakespeare -- The Future,"

And as only that individual becomes truly great who understands well that, while complete in himself in a certain sense, he is but a part of the divine, eternal scheme and whose special life and laws are adjusted to move in harmonious relations with the general laws of Nature, and especially with the moral law, the deepest and highest of all, and the last vitality of man or state.²⁷

A revealing kernel is here, a part of Whitman's intellectual approach to life, an abstract, philosophical musing that allows a lever for understanding both the unconscious as well as the conscious movements of beauty in Whitman. "No one will get at my verse who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming toward art or aestheticism."²⁸ Whitman's conscious objection to the presence of beauty in his art as a main objective restates only the fact that consciously and primarily he is not interested in beauty, but the word "mainly" hints at its importance in his unconscious

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and the narrow line between his primary concerns and beauty's supposed secondary role.

Now while I sat in the day and looked forth... In the heavenly aerial beauty, after the perturbed wind and the storms...²⁹

These lines from "When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloom'd" again give way to this suggestion. The vast setting for this poem is nature and the struggle between life and death, the moral drama; the poem concludes with an acceptance of death as a beautiful part of life. The lines

For not lifes joys alone I sing, repeating-the joy of death! The beautiful touch of Death, soothing and benumbing a few moments, for reasons...³⁰

in his "Song of Joy," seem bizaar and pathological. This embrace of death by Whitman hints at his youthful grapple with an emotional instability, which at last is overcome in his late middle-aged enthusiasm for the stabilizing effect of nature and his maturing understanding of morality.

William James, commenting on Whitman's temperament, says that Whitman was a "supreme contemporary example" of a person with the inability to feel evil.

And the vast all that is called evil I saw hastening to merge itself and become lost and dead.³¹

This is due solely, James says, to Whitman's lifelong emotional struggle and his intellectual endeavor to resolve it. James suggests further that Whitman experienced sporadic mystical feelings through the facility of nature.³² This is important because it helps to clarify the importance of nature in Whitman's personal life and in his art, and the role beauty played through and in nature.

Doubtless there comes a time--perhaps it has come to me--when one feels through his whole being, and pronouncedly the emotional part, that identity between himself subjectively and Nature objectively which Schelling and Fichte are so fond of pressing. How it is I know not, but I often realize a presence here--in clear moods I am certain of it and neither chemistry nor reasoning nor esthetics will give the least explanation.³³

Perhaps a partial explanation can be found in a philosophy of art.

Maritain, in his book <u>Approaches to God</u>, writes that often a poet will know nothing of the bonds which in actual existence attach both poetry and beauty necessarily to God; or if he does know, he does so, so confusedly that, although convinced of the religious essence of all poetry, as Whitman was, he will continue to confuse nature for God.³⁴ A1though the confusion of nature for God is not so important to this paper; the fact that these lines from Maritain suggest the solid and pressing importance of nature to some poets, is. Like Maritain, Fichte saw that some artists were able to give, through the agency of religious meditation, nature and moral order the personal characteristics of a god that has intelligence, will, and providential powers.³⁵ These lines from Specimen Days,

It seems indeed as if Peace and nutriment from heaven subtly filter into me as I slowly hobble down these country lanes and across fields, in the good air--as I sit here in solitude with Nature--open voiceless, mystic, far removed, yet palpable, eloquent Nature...³⁶

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suggest the religious feeling Whitman had for nature, a feeling that was extremely important to his experience of beauty. Whitman's belief in the romantic idea of the poet as prophet was also a part of this religious feeling.

I know I am solid and sound,

To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,

All are written to me, I must get what the writing means...³⁷ Whitman's youthful days, of 1855, begin his conscious search for these meanings, and their prophetic message, "The known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet."³⁸

In his essay on criticism written between 1865 and 1874, the meanings become clearer. He writes that a distinct perception and recognition of the wonders of "Humanity" and "Nature" should be the aim of all literature and that it should supply some argument or suggestive explanation of these tremendous wonders.³⁹It was his desire to formulate a poem that would directly or indirectly connive at an implicit belief in wisdom, health, mystery and beauty of every process.

I must follow up these continual lessons of the air, water, earth I preceive I have no time to lose.⁴⁰

Whitman's "implicit" belief in health is related to the second powerful energy in the development of Whitman's art, morality. It was Whitman's wish that poetry have the clear sun shine in its lines and the fresh air. He saw strength and power of health to be of greater value to poetry than delirium and abstraction. It was his opinion that strength and power of health could only be brought about if what he called the eternal moralities were always in the background of art.⁴¹

He writes in <u>Specimen Days</u> that the inevitable tendency of the poetic culture was to morbidity and abnormal beauty. (He uses Edgar Allen Poe as an example of this tendency.) He writes further that by renouncing first hand concretes and substituting something second hand and abstract in its place, that the artistic culture would then be contributing to the destruction of true art and the very existence of nature itself.⁴²

Agreeing with Marcus Aurelious, he writes that morality simply seemed to be a living and enthusiastic sympathy with nature, that art must affiliate itself with the hardy and same realities of nature, and that without nature as a main part of art, the "health elements" and "beauty elements" wither.⁴³

You have not learned of Nature--of the politics of Nature--you have not learned the great amplitude, rectitude, impartiality...⁴⁴

Whitman saw that the efforts of real poets, founders, religions, and literatures of all ages had been to bring back to the people the "divine original concrete." Hegel is echoed here. Hegel claims that in artistic creation the "spiritual meanings" of the finite world are revealed in a sensuous concrete form rather than in abstracts.⁴⁵ Whitman believed that he found these spiritual meanings and proceeded to make them solid for his readers.

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Beauty, knowledge, inure not to me... ...yet there are two or three things inure to me, I have nourish'd the wounded and sooth'd many a dying soldier...⁴⁶

Whitman's sporadic mystical experiences of nature and his evolving understanding of morality from these experiences, as suggested by James and generally commented upon by Maritain, will be made clearer with a last comment based upon the interpretation of Kant's idea of beauty and the sublime. James Collins, in his <u>A History of Modern European Philos-</u> ophy, writes that Kant saw experiences of beauty and sublimity as being drawn from nature in such a way as to furnish symbols of morality, and that this is one of the ways by which nature and morality are drawn together for men.⁴⁷

Therefore, in the art of Walt Whitman, beauty held both a primary and a secondary role. The primary role was an unconscious theory of beauty, which allowed Whitman to maintain and develop a pervading attitude of "cheer," both in his personality and in his literary work. Secondarly, Whitman consciously avoided obvious references to the singular idea of beauty and, therefore, remained generally true to his beloved "ensemble."

Two important ideas from this chapter help to develop the concept of a dual role in Whitman's experience of beauty: nature and morality. It is from harmony with nature, and the moral design he saw in nature, that Whitman believed could come art and the fruition of beauty. A fruition he saw as not being chance, but as "inevitable as life;" and, therefore, why harmony with nature and morality were the proper expression of beauty.

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Chapter FOUR

Whitman's Experiences of Beauty

Come Muse migrate from Greece and Ionia...
I, my friends, if you do not, can plainly see her,
The same undying soul of earth's, activity's,
 beauty's, heroism's expression...
Fear not O Muse! truly new ways and days receive,
 surround you...
And yet the same old human race, the same within,
 without, yearnings the same,
The same old love, beauty and use the same.⁴⁸

Whitman's call to the Muse in "Song of the Exposition," reveals an ideal he confesses to be his goal in writing his Leaves of Grass. "Fear not O Muse! truly new ways and days receive, surround you..." contains part of the clue. Whitman wrote in his "Democratic Vistas" that, after viewing humanity through what he calls the moral microscope and finding only a dry and flat Sahara containing hordes of petty malformations playing meaningless games, he then decided to found a new literature, a literature that would confound the abnormal libidinous forms and shallow notions of beauty he saw corrupting art and nature. His literature was to underlie life, be religious, consistent with science, and handle the elements competently and with power. He would not found his literature to celebrate beauty or refinement, nor to provide amusement alone.⁴⁹ It was his intent to write a poem that would cause a turn from the unhealthy back to the primordial innocence of nature. He would do this by incorporating into his poem the regenerating powers of the universal scheme of things, moral law.

The purpose of this chapter is to discover Whitman's personal experiences of beauty as recorded in his literary works. From the genesis of Whitman's <u>Leaves of Grass</u>, he sought to bring his reader not to a statement of fact or a florid display but into the very atmosphere of his themes and thoughts.⁵⁰

Away thou soul, (let me pick thee out singly, reader dear, and talk in perfect freedom, negligently, confidentially,) for one day and night at least, returning to the naked source-life of us all-to the breast of the silent savage all-acceptive Mother.⁵¹ This was not only a desire in the beginning but to the last leaf of his

work. Whitman writes that,

Common teachers, or critics are always asking what does it mean? Symphony of fine musicians or sunset, or sea waves rolling up the beach--what do they mean...(I do not intend this as a warrant for wildness and frantic escapades--but to justify the soul's frequent joy in what cannot be defined to the intellectual part, or to calculation.)⁵²

In the collection of poems called "Children of Adam," from his <u>Leaves of Grass</u>, he sings of this joy that cannot be calculated nor wholly understood. He says that he and his companion (the reader) had long been fooled but that now both of them were transmuted and had escaped as nature escapes, by becoming plants, animals, minerals and the other materials of nature. Doing so in order to void all, "but freedom and all but our own joy."⁵³

> 0 the gleesome saunter over fields and hillsides, The leaves and flowers of the commonest weeds, the moist fresh stillness of the woods, The exquisite smell of the earth at day break, and through the forenoon... O the joy of the vast elemental sympathy which only the human soul is capable of generating and emitting in steady and limitless floods.⁵⁴

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It is important to state again that Whitman's idea of nature is primordial in its innocence and very much a part of what William James called the "religion of healthy-mindedness,"⁵⁵ discussed briefly in Chapter Three of this paper. Whitman wrote that such a religion should supply the soul with a conscience which is not isolated. He writes further that if the conscience is isolated, it will only attain the beauty and purity of "glacial snow and ice." He claims that religion should engender in the soul a cheerful fervor, endowed with the modifications of human emotion, a field for intellectual inquiry and judgment and finally be made aware of the controlling factors of "material Nature."⁵⁶ What sort of beauty would Whitman see in such a soul? The beauty of moral health. Later in this chapter a few individuals whom Whitman knew and loved for their moral beauty will be discussed.

July 22, 1878, it is night in Camden, New Jersey, and Whitman is fascinated. From this fascination was to evolve a conviction that in nature there were special hours addressed alone to the soul. He set these hours in the deep of night and in the early dawn but, Whitman writes, "Night transcends."⁵⁷ "Then comes the night, different, inexpressibly pensive, with its own tender and tempered splender."⁵⁸ It is in these mystic dark hours that, like the European romantics, Whitman was able to find the release his "pent up" soul and flesh needed to sing their song,

> I wander all night in my vision, Stepping with light feet, swiftly and noiselessly stepping and stopping... * * *

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Now I pierce the darkness, new beings appear, The earth recedes from me into the night, I saw that it was beautiful, and I see that what is not the earth is beautiful.⁵⁹

"Night on the Praries," from Whitman's <u>Leaves</u> written while he was on his western tour, talks of a nocturnal walk. He stops to look at the sky and exclaims,

I walk by myself--I stand and look at the stars, Which I think now I never realized before... 60

Night appears as a classic image in his "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." Here night plays shroud and tomb to death.

> Whereto answering the sea, Delaying not, hurrying not, Wisper'd me through the night... Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death... Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly, Death, death, death, death, death...⁶¹

The repetition of the word death rocks the reader trance-like, mimicking the waves of the sea in the poem.

As was discussed earlier, concrete and living images were what Whitman wanted to make of his poems; images that created a mystic atmosphere that was strange and yet tangible. He wanted to create solidly, living, and healthy images in which natural and moral beauty could be seen and felt. In "Song of Myself," he speaks of a stallion as a "gigantic beauty."⁶² In his "The Ox Tamer," he writes,

See! some are such beautiful animals, so lofty looking...⁶³ This selectivity in Whitman manifests his often boasted contradiction of himself that the introductory quote to this chapter secretly admits,

And yet the same old human race, the same within, without, yearnings the same, The same old love, beauty and use the same.⁶⁴

So it would seem that though he boasts that the ancient Muse be surrounded by new days and ways, Whitman admits that he does not or is not able to free himself from feeling and expressing beauty as it has been felt and expressed traditionally. In "I Sing the Body Electric," he again proves himself selective when he writes that he knew a man, "a common farmer," with five sons and many grandsons. Whitman writes,

> When he went with his five sons and grand-sons to hunt or fish, You would pick him out as the most beautiful and vigorous of the gang...⁶⁵

"A common farmer," is important because it reveals Whitman's attraction toward what he thought to be simple and romantically uncomplicated.

It would seem paradoxical then why Whitman would be drawn to Lincoln and Emerson, who seem to be the opposite of simplicity. In considering the fact that Lincoln's personal charm lay in his humility and his moral integrity, as was also true of Emerson, then it is understandable why Whitman was drawn to both of them and why this attraction was lifelong.

In Lincoln's memory and from a profound admiration of him, Whitman left a collection of poems in his <u>Leaves</u>, called "Memories of President Lincoln." He left, also, a collection of lectures on Lincoln and his life.

Like Lincoln, Emerson was another concrete in Whitman's artistic

development and another clue to his experience of beauty. Around 1881 Whitman was invited to dinner at Emerson's home. Of the occasion he writes in his <u>Specimen Days</u>, "My seat and the relative arrangement were such that without being rude, or anything of the kind, I could just look squarely at E., which I did a good part of the two hours."⁶⁶ Whitman was to write of Emerson after his death, that he was not illustrious so much for his splendid intellectual or esthetic products, as he was for being one of the few flawless excuses for existing in the entire literary class of Whitman's era.⁶⁷

Although Lincoln and Emerson as individuals played important roles in Whitman's development, another set of individuals held nearly as important a position. In fact the whole occasion of the Civil War was to cause prompt change and altering of Whitman's life. This group of men were the wounded of the Civil War. Men whom Whitman compassionately nursed and admired for their moral fiber and strong character.

They were often young men, obeying the events and occasions about them, marching, soldering, fighting, foraging, cooking, working on farms or at some trade before the war--unaware of their own nature...⁶⁸

In these hospital camps Whitman was to find one of his most concrete and first-hand experiences of life and of death, of the blood that mocks beauty.

In his rounds of mercy he was to come upon individuals who by their simple courage and hope in the face of death made Whitman the more sure he was on

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the right way toward his artistic goal; men like young Erastus Haskell the drummer boy,⁷⁰ William Alcott, a "specimen" of the average good American race,⁷¹ or poor C. Glover from Wisconsin.⁷² These men and other men like them were to come together in the experience of Walt Whitman and influence not only the imagery of his poetry but in some areas, Whitman's very thinking itself.

A poem from this period that seems to sum up Whitman's emotional response to the war, is his tender, "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim." Although short, containing only four stanzas, the last stanza best speaks the point.

> Then to the third--a face nor child nor old, very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white ivory; Young man I think I know you--I think this face is the face of Christ himself, Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.⁷³

It is in the simple concreteness of character that these individuals allow for us to view one of the more profound and moving experiences of beauty that Whitman was to encounter. It is by moral virtue and natural tendency that these men had beauty of character--the two elements so essential to Whitman and his experience of beauty.

The accidental presence of beauty in nature was not the only medium that drew Whitman. He was also aware of the fine arts. Not only literature, but painting and music as well, drew his attention. In a poem called, "Italian Music In Dakota," he writes,

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While Nature, sovereign of this gnarl'd realm, Lurking in hidden barbaric grim recesses, Acknowledging rapport however far remov'd, (As some old root or soil of earth its last-born flower or fruit,) Listens well pleas'd.⁷⁴

On February 11, 1880, Whitman attended a concert, during which a septette by Beethoven was played. Of it he writes that it so carried him away that it caused him to see many an absorbing wonder. At an exhibition of Millet's paintings Whitman claims that he had never been so penetrated by art in this form as he was then, because, he writes,

...all inimitable, all perfect as pictures, works of mere art; and then it seem'd to me, with that last impalpable ethic purpose from the artist (most likely unconscious to himself) which I am always looking for.⁷⁵

Before the painting of "Custer's Last Rally" by John Mulvary, he repeats this same desire, because of a similar discovery. "I could look on such a work at brief intervals all my life without tiring; it is very tonic to me; then it has an ethic purpose below all, as all great art must have."⁷⁶

As Whitman grew older, he became more convinced that anyone who wanted to be truly religious, or philosophic, or artistic in the profoundest sense, must accept in perfect faith the moral unity and supreme sanity of the cosmic and creative scheme of things. He believed the true son of God would absolutely fuse disjoined nature and man. He saw the greatest poet not seeking beauty, but being sought by beauty.⁷⁷

> Now list to my mornings romanza, I tell the signs of the Answerer... * * * His welcome is universal, the flow of beauty is not more welcome or universal than he is... * * *

The words of the singers are the hours or minutes of the light, or dark, but the words of the maker of poems are general light and dark... * * * The words of true poems give you more than poems, They give you to form for yourself poems, religions, politics, life, and everything else... * * * Forever touching them or close upon them follows beauty, longing, fain, love-sick.⁷⁸

In effect then, Whitman's experience of beauty is cast in a traditional setting; even though this setting is often disguised and shouted down by the noise of his constant use of catalogs and his all embracing attitude,

> To emerge and be of the sky, of the sun and moon and flying clouds, as one with them.⁷⁹

An attitude and use that is in agreement with his basic romantic idea that every precise object, condition, combination, and process exhibits a beauty of its own; but is in contradiction to the basic way in which Whitman functioned and experienced beauty. This opposition of reality and the romantic ideal clearly exposes the psychic tensions in Whitman's works and in some ways, explains the reason for his obsession with "self."

Chapter FIVE

CONCLUSION

Air, soil, water, fire--those are words, I myself am a word with them--my qualities interpenetrate with theirs--my name is nothing to them, Though it were told in the three thousand languages, what would air, soil, fire know of my name...⁸⁰

"What would air, soil, water, fire know of my name..." seems a fine line to describe exactly what Whitman's literary efforts were about. It is in Whitmam's mystic experience of the essences of life, struck naked of every artificial camouflage, that "my name is nothing to them" has its meaning. It was in Whitman's growing realization that nature was the unconscious poem of his soul that he saw literature as trailing and meeting the problem of humanity, a problem he considered to be religious as well as social--religious in the sense that, although religion is arrested and preserved in churches and creed, he saw religion as not depending on them. He considered religion to be greatest when it knew its bibles in "new ways." He believed that in these "new ways" the "identified soul" could really confront religion.⁸¹

He saw any man who had health, pride, acuteness, and noble aspirations as being a man with the motive elements of the grandest style.⁸² He saw the United States as a land of noble men and women,⁸³ defending women against what he called the trivial and weak role society had forced upon them.

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Of philosophy he writes that although it contributes both to the general good of humanity and is indispensable to erudition, he saw it as lacking in ability to satisfy the deepest emotions of the soul. A want, he writes, that needs a living glow and warmth, which he saw being supplied by the old prophets and poets.⁸⁴

> Amelioration is one of the earth's works, The earth neither lags nor hastens, It has all attributes, growths, effect, latent in itself from the jump, It is not half beautiful only, defects and excrecences show just as much as perfections show...⁸⁵

This "becoming better" is discussed in Chapter Two of this paper, by way of comments given from contemporaries to Whitman and by present-day writers. This chapter deals mainly with those things that motivated the conception and growth of Whitman's literary career.

Three important points are made in Chapter Two: (1) Ezra Pound's comment that he wasn't really sure he loved beauty more than Whitman; (2) H.C. Merwin's assertion that Whitman had an intense love of nature, an assertion further developed by Roger Asselineau and P.W.B. Lewis; (3) morality. The discussion of this third point is begun by Lawrence, who writes that Whitman was the first American literary figure of any importance to wholly break with the old morality and begin establishing a "new order." P.W.B. Lewis clarifies the meaning of this "new order," by stating that Whitman wanted to reach behind tradition and assert nature untroubled by art. He also makes the important remark that Whitman wanted

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to re-establish man in his unfallen and primordial beginnings, which seems to agree with one of the oldest traditions in art and with Whitman's belief in the "religious idea of Nakedness,"⁸⁶ from which he says civilization came upon the ideas of heroism, form, and beauty.

> Seeking something yet unfound though I have diligently sought it many a long year, Singing the true song of the soul fitful at random, Renascent with grossest Nature or among animals, Of that, of them and what goes with them my poems informing...⁸⁷

Chapter Three dealt with Whitman's relationship to beauty through an investigation of his more important writings. In this chapter the importance of nature and morality are more evidently exposed, and how they related to Whitman's experience of beauty.

Two important points are made in Chapter Three that typify Whitman's idea of indirect expression. Consciously and directly, Whitman refused to concern himself with the theoretical idea of beauty; unless of course, beauty hindered his way to what Lewis called "nature untouched by art." When Whitman used the word "beauty" in his prose works, it was often as if he were trying to wring the very word of its artificiality; suggesting something similar to the quote at the head of this concluding chapter, "my name is nothing to them." Secondly, the unconscious and indirect role beauty played is both gravely important and in more ways than not, traditional--a fact suggested by the opening part of the poem, "Song of

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the Exposition," in which Whitman writes to the ancient Greek muse that it is the same "old human race" he sings of and the same beauty and use.

> There is no endowment in man or woman that is not tallied in you, There is no virtue, no beauty in man or woman, but as good is in you...⁸⁸

In Chapter Four Whitman's realizations of beauty are worked with, in, and through his writings. The importance of nature and morality are again emphasized. It is in this chapter that the remark of Richard Chase in his "Walt Whitman as American Spokesman," finds some reality. Mr. Chase writes that one does not read Whitman for his literary intricacies, but to appreciate simplicity. It is from Whitman's efforts at simplicity that an appreciation can be gained of Whitman's consistent effort at making his art as rugged and unpolished as nature itself. It is also from this attempt at simplicity that we can learn how Whitman recognized beauty. Striking, especially, are the war time accounts Whitman kept in his journals, as they are recorded in his Specimen Days. It is in these Civil War days that we find some of Whitman's most edifying and sad times and where we also find some of Whitman's most concrete and real images of life and, indirectly, of beauty. From these war time experiences a better and clearer understanding of Whitman's earlier and later realizations of beauty can be obtained. Finally, and in part because of these war time experiences, Whitman could more genuinely say that all great art must be founded on nature and an ethic purpose before it can have its "health element" or its "beauty

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element."

Good-bye my Fancy!

Now for my last--let me look back a moment; The slower fainter ticking of the clock is in me, Exit, nightfall, and soon the heart thud stopping...

Good-bye--and hail! my Fancy.⁸⁹

To close, it would seem valuable to say that this research paper has offered an opportunity of a better understanding of Whitman and his art and secondly, a clearer understanding of his attempts at defining and appreciating, beauty. This is true especially in the area of Whitman's direct absorption of many of the sweeping ideals of the romantics of Europe and the United States; with the added effect of his developing these ideals with common images, rather than elevating his language to the ethereal heights. This study has also exposed Whitman's personality and the way in which he functioned, as being more complicated than he would have us believe, especially, in regard to the more classic ideas he had of nature and morality and their involvement in art. Lastly, this paper has been generally important in clarifying the fact that though Whitman spoke of beauty in his prose and in his poetry, it would have been out of both his intended realm and psychological make-up to develop a practical theory of beauty. Throughout his major works he basically remains faithful to his concepts of indirect expression and "ensemble." A faithfulness that ruled his ability to dwell, with strict attention, on any one idea for very long. Psychologically his literature evolved from his struggle to attain some semblance of emotional stability and, therefore, was anchored more constantly

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in his unconscious; which controlled his awareness and demanded persistent attention. It is because of this that his proclamation in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads,"

This was a feeling or ambition to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America--and to exploit that Personality, indentified with place and date, in a far more candid and comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or book, ⁹⁰

is an apt description of not only Walt Whitman's literary attempts, but of the man himself.

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Footnotes

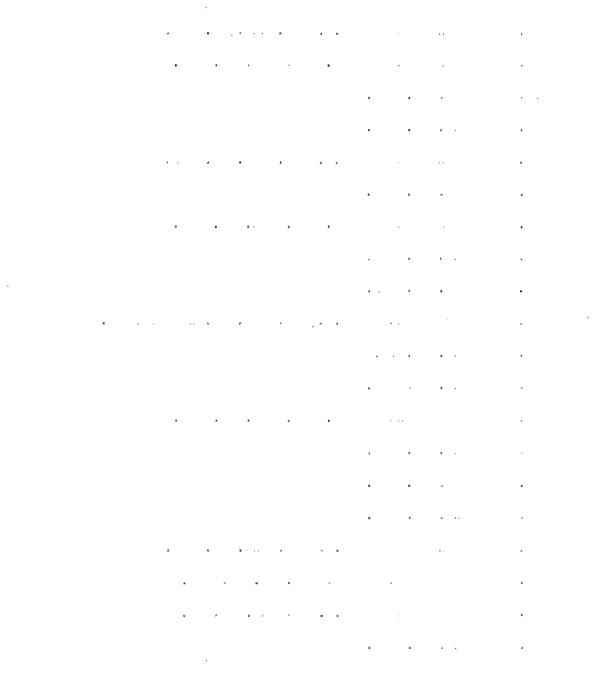
1.	Walt Whitman, <u>Leaves</u> of <u>Grass</u> , p. 53.*
2.	<u>id</u> ., <u>L</u> . <u>G</u> ., p. 37.
3.	Edwin H. Miller, <u>A</u> <u>Century of Whitman</u> <u>Criticism</u> , p. 6.
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7.	Walt Whitman, L.G., op. ćit., p. 96.
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9.	<u>id</u> ., p. 719-20.
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13.	Roy Harvey Pearce, <u>op</u> . <u>cit</u> ., p. 69-70.
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16.	<u>id</u> ., p. 83-87.
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18.	<u>id.</u> , p. 109.
19.	<u>id</u> ., p. 133.
20.	<u>id</u> ., p. 161.

^{*} All quotes from Whitman's poetry will be taken from the New American Library edition of Leaves of Grass, 1958, and will from now on be introduced by \underline{L} . G. All quotes from Whitman's prose works will be taken from The Modern Library edition of Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose and be introduced by <u>Pr</u>.

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- 25. <u>id</u>., p. 546-47.
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- 27. <u>id</u>., p. 543.
- 28. id., p. 558.
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- 31. <u>id</u>., p. 228.
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- 34. Jacques Maritains, <u>Approaches to God</u>, p. 82-3.
- 35. James Collins, A History of Modern European Philosophy, p. 568.
- 36. Walt Whitman, Pr., op. cit., p. 658-60.
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- 44. Walt Whitman, L.G., op. cit., p. 227.

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