

Walt Whitman (1819— 1892)

A Conversation into the Awe of the Everyday

I.

Classified as a poet.

Perhaps the American poet.

But to me,

Whitman is less about poetry
than vision.

I do not 'ohh and aww' over the style of his verse,
the lyrical meter,
the genius of his open and expansive lines,
that incorporated his lists of what he saw.

I celebrate how he saw.

Which is to say,

I celebrate what they call in Spanish:
his 'forma de ser' or his 'form of being.'

So as poets are known for being poets,
i.e. writers with a clever coin of a phrase or some verbal flair,

But Whitman's plain style of free verse,

Works perfectly with his celebration of the plain,

The things that are cheapest and commonest.

He actually has something to say,

And what it is he has to say is this song,

Which is less about how he says it,

And more about what he says

And even more about who the person is who is saying it.

II.

I celebrate the song of himself, which by the way,
is also my song and your song.

How do I know?

Because Whitman celebrates existence.

If you exist, then this is your song.

It is also a song of us, as a people

who by the way, still share a common country
idealistically called the United States.
It is a celebration of us and our diversity,
without messy overtones of exclusionist nationalism,
Because at its root his poetry is about love for what is, for everyone.

III.

Here is the bold one.
Who doesn't think of his experience
as merely that of one random individual.
Rather he is so bold as to believe that
His experience is part of a more universal experience.
He believed that what he felt must also be a human feeling experienced by
everyone.
He saw himself as a representative of humanity,
Of America.
This was heroic imagination— full tilt.

IV.

And he doesn't talk to abstractions
He talks to you
Which is also me,
Which may be why I can outgrow other writers,
But Whitman always comes along when I sit in the woods with his book,
Just as he said he would do.
And it is easy to fall under his spell.
And the spell is this:
to observe a spear of grass.
We should never get too old, too busy, too sophisticated,
To not hold a spear of grass and wonder and awe and ask
'What is it?'
And Whitman does that.
Whitman is a conversation in the things of awe
And wonder.

V.

This self-educated one,
Formally educated until the age of eleven,
Is now read aloud in circles of literature
from Prairie Lights in Iowa City
to City Lights in San Francisco,
Studied in the halls of Harvard to Salamanca.

To this self-educated one, his greatest treasure was
His library card.
He read everything he could carry
and became a teacher for five years
And he wrote in his off time as a teacher
Later he moved into journalism
Out on the beat
Observing New York, i.e. The world
Making long lists of the things he saw.
Getting as far as New Orleans.
Expanding his world there.
Ending up in Washington D.C.
helping wounded soldiers from the Civil War
Seeing daily the unspeakable horrors
While sitting bedside
An observer
A mental note taker
Simultaneously consumed in empathy.

He wrote once, "Whoever walks a furlong without sympathy
Walks to his own funeral, dressed in his shroud."

VI.

He set out to make an account
One book, written right up to his death bed
Never finished.
Edited and re-edited

Adding, erasing,
One story
The story of celebration
Of just the commonest things that are.
He summed it all up in Grass,
the most common and overlooked of things
It was his metaphor for the everyday miraculous that surrounds us.

VII.

It is something to note,
That America's Poet
Was despised and rejected in his day.
That he paid \$55 dollars of his own money
To publish something that can stand right next to Shakespeare on the bookshelf.
Yet he was despised, because of the homosexual overtones in his poetry
They are not subtle.
He is not hiding behind coded or figurative language.
He describes the male form in sensual detail,
And it was not appreciated in his day.
He lived a life of quiet repression.
In one poem he spoke of the great joy he had once in a bar,
Sitting in the corner,
Holding the hand of a male friend he admired
And how they sat there and just held hands
And didn't talk.
And when you read that scene,
You realize, Whitman loved, as you love,
For holding hands with someone you love
In sweet quietness, that words could only clutter up,
Doesn't depend on one's orientation,
It is simply a universal in the magic of human experience.
And so, Whitman can almost get away with 19th century taboo of all taboos,
Because he is so genuinely openhearted and vulnerable in his love.
Love: That is how Whitman became so long lasting in our consciousness.

He could have no doubt left behind letters laced with acidic bitterness and frustration,

For a society that made him feel like he had to hide his real self in the corners.

Instead, he spoke of the beauty of that moment,

And while many cannot get over the fact that he was writing about holding the hand of another man,

Many can read this and feel happy for him.

Many can read this and smile about a time in their own life when they quietly did nothing more than hold the hand of one they loved. And it was overwhelmingly sweet.

In this simple way, Whitman cracks open a door that America is still not willing to fully open, but Whitman is so sincere and genuine in his love, that he must automatically make those trying to shut that door— feel a bit guilty for doing so.

How could Whitman who was not allowed to be himself

In such a deep way,

Celebrate a country for being itself?

Especially when,

if those he celebrated knew who he really was, would have been openly hostile to him.

Surely he knew that all these regular people on the street

Who he celebrated in his poetry

Would not accept him for who he was

And yet he accepted them as they were.

Where did he draw his strength?

So many people get out of whatever they're in

If they don't feel appreciated.

Here, the greatest appreciator of everyone else

Who is not appreciated himself in his lifetime.

They say Whitman represents the best of us

And what he does

Is he Forwards acceptance and love

Even when it's not returned.

That is what this poet did.

He celebrated something his whole life

That didn't celebrate him.

Where did he get that kind of strength?
It maybe came from the kind of song he sang.
At the very deepest root of his song
Is gratitude.
Which is maybe how he didn't digress into a bitter old man
Instead he was a happy old man,
The strength came from his very habit of gratitude
Seeing the dazzle of light in the everyday.
It's knowing that even when the world doesn't seem to value you
That the world has never been any better or worse than it is right now.
The relentless celebration of himself, others, and spears of grass,
IS the secrete to the song.