Thoreau, Whitman, and the Matter of New York
Author(s): J. M. Tyree
Source: *New England Review (1990-)*, 2006, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2006), pp. 61-75

*J. M. Tyree*

# Thoreau, Whitman, and the Matter of New York

> *. . . not only writers of such sophistication as Emerson and Melville will raise the theme, the American theme, of Nature versus civilization. You can find it in the politics of Andrew Jackson, in the observations of foreign travelers, in the legend of Abraham Lincoln, in Stephen Douglas no less than in Francis Parkman.*
>
> —*Perry Miller,* Errand into the Wilderness

It is difficult to picture Henry David Thoreau in mid-nineteenth-century New York City, or indeed in any other incarnation of any other city at any time at all. Yet there he was, first in 1843 during a miserable stint tutoring for William Emerson's son Haven on rural Staten Island. It was during a later visit in 1856 that he met Walt Whitman. According to Thoreau's biographer Robert D. Richardson, Jr., in *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind,* the meeting of the two writers took place through Bronson Alcott, who brought Thoreau and a woman named Sarah Tyndale to meet Whitman in Brooklyn after listening to an oratorical performance by Henry Ward Beecher. The visitors had crossed Brooklyn ferry, going the opposite direction, away from mast-hemmed Manhattan. As Richardson has it, Whitman led them up two flights of narrow stairs to the attic room he shared with his brother Eddy. The impressions of the brothers' bodies were visible on the unmade bed in the corner, along with a chamber pot—"the vessel," Alcott called it, primly—undisguised beneath the bed.

Both men had recently published what would later be regarded as two classics of American literature—*Walden* appeared in 1854, the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855—and both men, considered by any secular yardstick of literary glory, were abjectly unsuccessful. Thoreau was thirty-nine, Whitman thirty-seven and prematurely gray. The positive thing they had in common was a well-connected group of supporters, including Alcott and, above all, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had in one way or another encouraged or championed both authors. Apart from that, it is difficult to imagine two more different writers and personalities, and it is hardly surprising that their two-hour conversation was subdued and cautious. Thoreau and Whitman respected each other, though, and their mutual admiration grew rather than diminished over the years because they regarded one another as altogether representative Americans.

The influence of New York City on American intellectual life is, paradoxically, both obvious and difficult to chart. As late as 1987, Thomas Bender wrote in *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* that "the history of men and women who sought a place for the mind in the American capital of commerce" was in effect "a voyage into the unknown."

The city's role in the development of Whitman's particular aesthetic is fairly evident. More surprising is the influence that the city had on Thoreau at a formative moment in his aesthetic development—albeit an influence in a "negative" sense. New York was a shock to Thoreau's system, and his recoiling from an urban scene he did not wish to understand confirmed his subsequent role in championing the American wilderness as an antidote to civilization. Thoreau produced his first major literary essay, "A Winter Walk," while sunk down in the unpleasant period of 1843 in Staten Island.

In Whitman and Thoreau one is forced to confront a basic antithesis in the American attitude about city life, the love–hate relationship that continues more subtly in different forms in later authors: the animating spirit of Whitman reappearing, for example, in William Carlos Williams's urban epic *Paterson* and in the Manhattan poems of Frank O'Hara; the skepticism, distrust, cynicism, and satire about the city trailing from Jefferson and Thoreau to moderns such as Eliot in London and William Gaddis in New York. And this battle over the meaning of cities in American culture is not restricted to literature, but also relates tangentially to the urban-versus-rural rhetoric encoded in contemporary politics, between the empty spaces of the Red States and the "overpopulated" coastal urban corridors, which in their most caricatured forms seem like manifestations of two cultures, two nations, two Americas.

Reducing the complexity of classic literary texts in order to have them mirror our own contemporary imaginary places would be altogether too facile, but the endurance of the warring ideas is a reminder that one of the key aspects of the American tradition centers on a basically antagonistic relationship between city and country life. Bender's scholarship shows that the meaning of the city in American intellectual life cannot conform exactly to that of any European model, despite the clear influence of Europeans and European ideas on the formation of American ideas and the perennial insecurity of American intellectuals in the face of European culture. In *The Country and the City,* the suggestive study by the British Marxist critic Raymond Williams, for example, English country life is traditionally regarded as the life of small farming settlements in bucolic locations, in which the moral life is supposed to reflect the landscape. But that landscape is always already understood to be cultivated, whereas the founding myths of America have more to do with what intellectual historian Perry Miller famously called a national "errand into the wilderness." This is an errand of tracklessness, discovery, and the perception of an empty new world of endless possibility, of starting fresh or being left alone rather than simply preserving established expectations of community. In this sense, there is nothing to compare in the English tradition to the highly individualized aesthetic of self-reliance in Emerson and Thoreau, nor to Thoreau's radical conception of wildness, which is far more extreme and ascetic than any European counterpart. Thoreau's vision harkens back to an early Christian monkish concept of inhabiting a desert solitude more than it reflects any idealized conception of English village life.

The dim view of the city that provided a foil for Thoreau's positive vision of wilderness, however, was a common one developed from the story that descends from the destruction of the Tower of Babel in Genesis. As Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit put it in their book *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies,* the

problem "is not with the city per se, but with cities given to commerce and pleasure instead of religious worship. . . . Hubris, empire building, secularism, individualism, and the power and attraction of money—all these are connected to the idea of the sinful City of Man." London, of course, developed long before New York, but at roughly the same time, in the first half of the nineteenth century, both cities reached a boiling point of capitalist expansion and population explosion—a process similar to that happening in the "megacities" of the Third World in our own time, from which one can get a contemporary taste of our own previous misery. By 1820, London's population was more than a million, but it already had half a million people living in it by the mid-1600s. New York's transformation was more sudden and extreme. Brooklyn went from a population of a few thousand at the turn of the nineteenth century to the fourth largest city in America by the mid-1800s, with more than 200,000 people. According to David Reynolds, in the fifty years between 1810 and 1860, the population of the United States grew six times faster than the world average, and "the percentage of Americans living in cities grew from 6 percent to 20 percent of the total." One would have to consult the current development reports of the U.N. from Lagos, Cairo, or Mexico City in order to come to grips with this sort of transformation of human topography and the catastrophic urban poverty resulting from it.

The intellectual backlash and revolt from such scenes is traditionally associated with Blake and Wordsworth in London. Raymond Williams's summary is succinct:

> Blake saw a common condition of "weakness and woe." Wordsworth saw strangeness, a loss of connection, not at first in social but perceptual ways: a failure of identity in the crowd of others which worked back to a loss of identity in the self, and then, in these ways, a loss of society itself, its overcoming and replacement by a procession of images: the "dance of colours, lights and forms," "face after face" and there are no other laws. No experience has been more central in the subsequent literature of the city.

As Williams argues, neither Blake nor Wordsworth falls prey to a completely nostalgic view of the country nor to a view of the city as completely pernicious: for Blake, the building of a holy Jerusalem was to take place within the city, not through its destruction; for the Wordsworth of *The Prelude* ("Residence in London"), the city holds "wonder and obscure delight," though it remains a place where "the human heart is sick."

Thoreau and Whitman had very different reactions to mid-nineteenth-century New York, different from those of Blake and Wordsworth and also from each other, a fact that made their early mutual suspicion and awkwardness as understandable as their later mutual admiration was remarkable, particularly in light of their profound philosophical differences. Thoreau's utter rejection of the city was more total, and more totally American, than anything in the mode of English literature; for him, the achievement of a transcendentalist breakthrough involved the forging of a new American humanity in the crucible of wild nature, as well as a sloughing-off of civilization so extreme that it ultimately collides with a glass ceiling of plausibility in

the contradictory impulses of ascetic withdrawal and human fellowship in *Walden*.

Perhaps even more astonishing and, indeed, aesthetically radical in a sense without clear precedent, was Whitman's eventual, but not immediate, all-embracing urban poetics. At question is the vision required by transcendentalism: does the celebration of the details of reality stop at the city limits, when it is confronted by crowds, filth, poverty, confusion, and the cheapness of mass human existence? Or it is possible, as Whitman's poetry seems to argue, in a way reminiscent of Spinoza, that nothing can be excluded, so that the very details from which the New England transcendentalists recoil must be viewed as part of the unfolding divinity? In other words, is it only "nature" that is natural, or are human beings and their works, however they might appear befouled and degraded by the masses, also a legitimate wellspring of the deepest inspiration? Was transcendentalism before Whitman not quite transcendental enough in some real sense, if it sliced off that much of the material of existence and denied it entry into the realm of the holy? Can one really hold to such narrow limits and disallow so much? Could the cant of butcher-boys, the corpses of prostitutes, and firemen crushed to death by collapsing buildings—all images from *Leaves of Grass*—be capable or worthy of apotheosis in American literature? These are the questions that evolve from a comparison of the paths taken by Thoreau and Whitman in their consideration of the matter of New York.

✶

The story of Thoreau's entanglement with New York is one of the lesser-known biographical episodes in American literary history, minor but tantalizing. New York contributed to the development of Thoreau's art in a negative sense, almost like a chemical that brings out some valuable quality through its harsh reaction with an unaccommodating substance. His formative intellectual influence, Emerson, had a "great" distaste for New York and few contacts there, according to Thomas Bender. Similarly, Bender argues persuasively that Emerson, like Charles Eliot Norton, Boston's "apostle of culture," was much wrapped up in the concept of New England's "metropolitan gentry," which envisioned that society would be "officered by a best class" of leaders who embraced democracy but did not think it meant muddy vulgarianism. Leaving aside the complexity of these ideas as they entangled themselves in pre–Civil War American politics, what remains clear is that Thoreau arrived in New York with Emersonian ideals of radical self-reliance and individualism that formed the basis of his genius but left him generally unequipped to respond with any sympathy to the crowded streets of Manhattan.

Thoreau's letters from Staten Island are an intriguing record of this author's intellectual firmness—here often bordering on the unhappily inflexible—as well as a reminder that his experience with the literary marketplace was a case of mutual rejection, involving more than the rarefied disdain of an as-yet-uncanonized saint of the American wilderness. Thoreau arrives at Castle Gardens, Staten Island, already aloof, "incurious about them and their city," as he puts it in a letter of May 11, 1843,

to Mrs. John Thoreau.[1] His initial act of observation is to satirize the cab drivers at the wharf, and to describe "a confused jumble of heads and soiled coats, dangling from flesh-colored faces,—all swaying to and fro, as by a sort of undertow." This perceptual confusion sets the pattern for Thoreau's fundamental problem with New York, its disorienting and splintering effect on one's attention, the very *overwhelmingness* of mass humanity. This is the classic reaction—to find the city initially stimulating, but ultimately enervating—and it illustrates Wordsworth's complaint that one loses one's identity in "face after face" of the crowd. Within two weeks, Thoreau was writing to his aunt that he was "rather unaccountably" sick: "I have been sick ever since I came here," he wrote on May 23, as if the sickness were an unavoidable feature of being "here."

The Staten Island of 1843, of course, was still rural, and Thoreau writes with more spirit of the ocean waves, the beaches, and the view of New York and environs from the hill behind the house. He goes "moping about the fields and woods here as I did in Concord," but he also takes an interest in observing the boatloads of immigrants, sometimes more than a thousand a day, coming into New York Harbor. He visits and admires the Quaker preacher Lucretia Mott, who speaks in Hester Street of slavery and "the degradation of women" as an "abuse of the Bible." He meets Henry James, Sr., who makes such an excellent impression that he "humanized New York for me." Ostensibly sent to Staten Island as a tutor, Thoreau really considered it his main mission to try selling his writing to the New York literary magazines. He tries John O'Sullivan's great *Democratic Review,* the organ of "Young America" and Manifest Destiny that, as Bender notes, helped to fuel the creation of a national literature by inspiring Whitman and Melville. He tries the *New Mirror,* the *New World, Brother Jonathan,* the *Knickerbocker;* a manuscript is placed here and there, but mostly Thoreau discovers that what he wants to write is largely unsalable and the market glutted.

By October 1, he writes to Mrs. John Thoreau:

> As for Eldorado, that is far off yet. My bait will not tempt the rats; they are too well fed. The *Democratic Review* is poor, and can only afford half or quarter pay—which it *will* do—and they say there is a L[a]dy's Companion that pays—but I could not write anything companionable.

There is a great deal of charm, wit, humility, and backbone in Thoreau's unwillingness or perhaps even inability to modulate himself. Part of his rejection of the city might be a matter of sheer personal stubbornness, but it is also a sign of growing intellectual maturation that he has already relativized the usual measures of literary success. Thoreau knows himself, and he is not foolish enough to think there is any point in pretending to be someone else. He is simply not "companionable" and that is that; he enjoys and accepts his own incapacities and jokes through his bronchitis about the

1. These letters can be found in *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau* (Walter Harding and Carl Bode, eds.), as well as in an edited but more accessible form: "Letters from Staten Island," in Philip Lopate's anthology *Writing New York: A Literary Anthology.* I rely on both collections for cited material. Biographical details on Thoreau throughout are derived from *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind,* by Robert D. Richardson.

fantastic "Eldorado" to come—looking forward instead, one is tempted to note, to sleeping rough, studying iced-over ponds, and early death from TB. He is an isolato who that cannot *use* the city, at least not as literary material. In his Journal entry for September 24, 1843, he is angrier and the mask slips off: "Who can see these cities and say that there is any life in them. I walked through New York yesterday—and met no real and living person." Thoreau would have agreed with Eliot's assessment of the London crowds: he had not been aware that death had undone so many.

To the extent that Thoreau values New York at all, it is out of gratitude that it has conformed to his expectations and duly disappointed him. Early on, he was at least willing to admit that "the crowd is something new and to be attended to," even though he meant this in a negative sense. But already by June 8, he writes to Emerson:

> I don't like the city better, the more I see it, but worse. I am ashamed of my eyes that behold it. It is a thousand times meaner than I could have imagined. It will be something to hate,—that's the advantage it will be to me; and even the best people in it are part of it and talk coolly about it. The pigs in the street are the most respectable part of the population. When will the world learn that a million men are of no importance compared with *one* man? . . . The sea-beach is the best thing I have seen. It is very solitary and remote, and you only remember New York occasionally.

The best thing about New York City, in other words, is the possibility of not knowing that you're in it, when you find yourself in places where the city is out of sight and almost completely out of mind. But at this point Thoreau recognizes his hatred as an "advantage" because it has not changed him but rather bolstered his sense of himself, and in that specific sense contributed to his developing counter-aesthetic. This letter flatters with evocations of Emersonian themes of self-reliance and tells his mentor what he wants to hear about Thoreau's individualism, as well as expressing the proper Boston Brahmin derision for the crowd. But Thoreau's lack of gentleness here, as well as his emphasis on being "solitary and remote" rather than companionable, also hints at his mature aesthetic in *Walden* and the insistent radicalism that would later divide him from Emerson. Eventually Thoreau's satire would expand to include among its targets "the metropolitan gentry" and Emersonian forms of agreeable companionability as well as the local villagers of Concord. This form of self-reliance would become more absolute and unyielding than anything Emerson imagined or desired for himself.

Yet for all this, nature is never spent for Thoreau, not even in the midst of his ebb tide in Staten Island. He has brought Concord with him; to his credit, he will not let go of it for the transitory note in the *Lady's Companion,* and it, Concord and everything it entails, will not let go of him. A Journal entry near the end of MS Vol. 8, which is filled with omissions and missing pages but appears to be from August 1843, tells a different and more internally revealing story of Thoreau's intellectual development:

> Tonight while I am arranging these sprigs of white cedar in my scrapbook I am reminded by their fragrance of the pines and hemlocks which hang over my native town. I love the whole race of pines . . . men nowhere live as yet a natural life.

The theme is continued in the entry of August 26, 1843: "we shall be acquainted [with] and shall use flowers and stars, and sun and moon, and occupy this nature which now stands over and around us." These notes must be read as indicating the prevailing wind in Thoreau's mind, or perhaps point to the unshakable compass he used to guide his way past the city. The cost was a conventional and dualistic contempt for city-dwellers, who are seen as animals lower than pigs or, indeed, animated corpses, since New York was devoid of a single "real and living person."

The reward for this hostility was an aesthetic steadfastness and a wry skepticism that allowed Thoreau to develop intellectually toward *Walden* without much more than a minor interruption during his Staten Island errand, without bewitchment or magnetic attraction to the city as a point of interest. Remarkably, there is a massive sense in which Thoreau was almost completely blind to one of the most fascinating aspects of his era. The city played only a minor role in Thoreau's intellectual life—his ideas were mostly fixed before he arrived—but it shored up his rejectionist stance toward what early Christian thinkers like Tertullian used to call "the world," the realm of sin, commerce, and trivial stimulation, the world that is "too much with us." New York gave Thoreau a glimpse of everything that failed to move him, but it also clearly produced a sense of nostalgia for his "native town" that would guide him to finishing his first major essay in an unfamiliar locale. "If I can finish an account of a winter's walk in Concord in the midst of a Staten Island summer," Thoreau wrote to Emerson on May 23, 1843, "not so wise or true I trust—I will send it to you soon."

Despite his misgivings, "A Winter Walk," which he had begun writing while he was still living in Emerson's house, is generally regarded as the beginning of his artistic maturity. As his biographer Richardson writes, "his apprenticeship, his time of reliance on the judgment of others was coming to an end." That was the state of things when Thoreau left Concord for Staten Island, and the time spent in New York helped complete the process. Within a month or so of his arrival, "A Winter Walk" was largely complete, and in March 1845, about a year and a half after his departure from New York, after a period in his father's pencil factory and various travels, he settled in, chopping "tall arrowy white pines" for timber in the woods near Walden Pond.

*

Around the same time that Thoreau was sunk down in Staten Island, Whitman was midway through his own Manhattan literary apprenticeship, which had begun in 1841. Perhaps because he had grown up on Long Island and in Brooklyn, exploring the seedy maritime zones and being taken under the wing of the gatekeepers and deckhands of the Brooklyn–Manhattan ferry as a child, super-saturation in city life did not instinctively disgust him the way it did Thoreau. Thanks to the work of Thomas Bender, as well as the more recent biographical accounts by David Reynolds, Justin Kaplan, and Philip Callow, Whitman's intellectual relationship with the city has already been documented in detail. The first major impact on his development came from his work in the burgeoning genre of magazines and penny papers as a writer, editor, and printer, and also his experience as an operative in Democratic party politics.

Between 1841 and 1845, Whitman did work, sometimes in several capacities, for John O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review,* John Neal's *Brother Jonathan* (whose motto was the "Cheapest Reading in the World"), the *Daily Plebeian,* the nativist New York *Aurora, The Tattler,* the *Sun* (Moses Beach's famous penny paper), the *New York Mirror,* the *Democrat, The Aristidean,* the *Star,* and, of course, the *Brooklyn Eagle.* The work was various in more than one sense: Whitman might write for a paper on which he worked as a typesetter, and he could also edit while writing, thus producing fictional "tales" for one magazine, political propaganda for another, and covering the crime beat and coroner's office for the more lurid periodicals. His innate flexibility got him work with some of the same editors, such as Neal, who had given Thoreau such difficulty.

But adaptability had its cost, and Whitman was later to be embarrassed by his apprentice novel, *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate, A Tale of the Times,* which was pumped out in 1842 for publication as an "extra" in the *New World,* another paper that rejected Thoreau. As Kaplan suggests, this novel, a tract for temperance societies that wound up selling 20,000 copies, conveyed a conventional view of the city as a wicked and deceitful pit of gin mills and whorehouses effecting the corruption of the farmer's apprentice Evans. "Quite what one would expect from the perpetual mama's boy," said Leslie Fielder, "and the refugee from a small town." Along similar lines, Thomas Brasher would later express the idea that "it is almost incredible that the man who wrote *Leaves of Grass* also wrote *Franklin Evans.*"[2] If Thoreau was not companionable enough, it may be that at first Whitman was all too companionable and cozy in the realm of acceptable clichés and standard genres that the city papers and magazines made available.

And what, indeed, happened to Whitman during what Philip Callow calls the "lost years" of 1849–55, the period of great change in which the newspaperman transformed himself away from such clichés into America's first great urban poet? While Thoreau refused to accommodate himself at all, Whitman, it might be said, went to the opposite aesthetic extreme, identifying himself so thoroughly with New York that his own personality was either effaced or else grew to encompass the entire city, which in his mind itself became a model for the entire country. Exactly how this happened is regarded by Whitman's biographers as something of a mystery; *that* it happened nobody denies was a stroke of immense good luck for American literature. Yet even here, the poet was not operating in a vacuum. The atmosphere of O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review* created some of the conditions for the emergence of Whitman and Melville as the first great American writers associated not with New England but with the city of New York. O'Sullivan's periodical was the flagship of the Jacksonian-era "Young America" movement, and its editor was responsible for coining the evocative phrase "Manifest Destiny." In sum, the publication's agenda was simultaneously political and aesthetic. As Bender observes:

---

2. For these remarks on *Franklin Evans* and the critical quotations from Fiedler and Brasher on Whitman's novel, see Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life,* 105, and David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography,* 84. These two books are the main sources for biographical details on Whitman in this essay, along with Philip Callow's *From Noon to Starry Night.*

> . . . the *Democratic Review* proposed the logic that democracy would equalize wealth, that such redistribution would increase leisure and comfort among the masses, thus increasing their taste for "elevated and refined enjoyment." The final result would be a worthy democratic literature and art. "The Spirit of literature and the Spirit of democracy are one."

This set of assumptions engendered a conversation about the possibility of establishing a national literature that would be truly American, and thereby, in Bender's view, "established the terms of intellectual life for Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, who were both democrats and Democrats." Bender's conclusion is not that *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Leaves of Grass* (1855) were simply carrying out the literary program of Young America, but that Whitman had absorbed the national conversations and "by some mysterious alchemy transmuted them into the great poem they dreamed about."

Emerson, of course, was one of the major figures of this era calling for a new national literature in America. In March 1842 he came to New York to deliver a lecture series that included "The Poet," a presentation Whitman attended and wrote about rapturously. Whatever his distaste for the city and his general emphasis on nature, Emerson's lecture, as Callow points out, called for the American poet to visit "the factory, the railroad, and the wharf," even if he is envisioned spending most of his time in "forest walks," sitting on mossy mountains, and paddling a canoe. Whitman had already done more than visit the wharf; he had grown up there. He had a deep instinctive love for the city's ferries, and they formed the material closest to hand. Collected as a *Second Series* essay, "The Poet" begins with a remarkable passage criticizing those who "write poems from the fancy, at a safe distance from their own experience." Emerson continues in a way that bears heavily on Whitman's subsequent development:

> But the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact: Orpheus, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Plato, Plutarch, Dante, Swedenborg, and the masters of sculpture, picture, and poetry. For we are not pans and barrows, nor even porters of the fire and torch-bearers, but children of the fire, made of it, and only the same divinity transmuted, and at two or three removes, when we know least about it.

Thus a song of oneself would reflect a muse of fire, helping it ascend the brightest heaven of invention; or, in Emersonian transcendentalist terms, the "Universe is the externisation of the soul."

What is momentous here, and a clue to the greatest mystery of Whitman's art, might very well be that he took Emerson more seriously than Emerson took himself. In "The Poet," Emerson remarks that "though thou shouldest walk the world over, thou shalt not be able to find a condition inopportune or ignoble." Very well, Whitman seems to respond, then nothing is excluded, or excludable. It would be a sin—"thou shalt not": Whitman almost takes Emerson's sentence as a biblical commandment—to exclude *any* "sensuous fact." If the universe truly externalizes the fire within and

there cannot be an ignoble condition, then the poet must embrace the city with all its filth and horror, wonder and danger, disastrous poverty and fabulous wealth, all its contradictions and tragedy. These too must be essentially holy aspects of oneself. Include sex, the butchers, the common prostitutes, felons on trial in courts, assassins, delinquents. In short, include what Emerson himself and Thoreau cannot include. Include yourself "Amongst the Multitude." Include, include, include. In the crowd, Thoreau can find "no real and living person." Whitman confronts each figure in the same great multitude in "To a Stranger" and forces himself to "see to it that I do not lose you." These are the two divergent paths to the heart of the city; Whitman has taken the alley less traveled and that has made all the difference.

At issue here is the defining nature of transcendentalism: its "proper" sphere, its scope, and its overall relationship to American literature. Also in question is whether this general disposition is inherently inclined to a philosophical dualism that takes a bucolic tour in nature before returning to the comfortable estates of the New England gentry, or whether this way of seeing can be loosed upon the sordid details of the lives of the masses. Ought we really to prevent it from taking hold of what is most ordinary and vile as well as what is normally considered wholesome and "inspiring"? In the preface to *Leaves of Grass,* Whitman answers in a way that echoes Emerson's "The Poet":

> As the attributes of the poets of the kosmos concentre in the real body and soul and in the pleasure of things they possess the superiority of genuineness over all fiction and romance. As they emit themselves facts are showered over with light . . . . the daylight is lit with more volatile light . . . . also the deep between the setting and rising sun goes deeper many fold. Each precise object or condition or combination or process exhibits a beauty . . . . the multiplication table its—old age its—the carpenter's trade its—the grand-opera its . . . . the hugehulled cleanshaped New-York clipper at sea under steam or full sail gleams with unmatched beauty . . . .

Like Emerson, Whitman aligns himself against "romance," or what Emerson calls "fancy." Also in keeping with Emerson, Whitman's deepest sympathy is reserved for what both call "facts." For Emerson it is "every sensuous fact" awaiting its discovery through a revelation of manifold meanings; in Whitman the light of day is intensified by the "more volatile light" that showers over the "facts" as they "emit themselves." But there is a strategic difference, not in the shared theory so much as in the divergent practice. When Emerson claims that there is no "condition inopportune or ignoble," he means what he says, but perhaps there ought to be a footnote with some fine print explaining that he's not really all that comfortable endorsing the *most* ignoble material. Indeed, it will be Whitman's inclusion of sex that will make Emerson and Thoreau most uneasy, even while both laud his democratic experiment. With Whitman the embrace of the ignoble goes further, or is more consistent. When he says each "condition or combination or process exhibits a beauty," he means to include *everything,* and to back it up he cites as his initial example the glories of "the multiplication table."

In the end, the difference here may be more a matter of temperament or literary instinct than of emphatic intellectual choice. Nevertheless, it has intellectual

ramifications that up to the present day have often been understood poorly. Even as great a cultural interpreter as Perry Miller, in his essay "Nature and the National Ego," does not fully address how decisively Whitman departed from the standard American opposition of "Nature versus civilization." The preface to Miller's essay posits that the United States "found itself obliged to conceive of itself in the nineteenth [century] as still running the Puritans' errand into an apparently limitless civilization." Immediately Perry notes the Gordian Knot—"How then it can cope with New York, Detroit, Gary, becomes its problem"—but he does not address the far-reaching implications of Whitman's solution. We must depart from the design laid down most influentially by Miller for understanding American thought as a whole, in order to address Whitman as a special case or as a differently shaded thread in the larger pattern.

In David Reynolds's estimation, Whitman's intellectual background was as saturated in contemporary mystical pietistic religious movements such as spiritualism, Swedenborgianism, and Harmonialism as it was in Emersonian transcendentalism. The greater surprise is that Whitman was reading Hegel and the German idealists. In Reynolds's synopsis, "Hegel taught of a spirit pervading all phenomena, emerging from antagonistic forces." Additionally, Reynolds suggests, "Hegel accorded with Whitman's jingoism, since the all-resolving philosopher seemed to parallel the all-tolerating America." Whitman's reading in philosophy was not systematic but came, as one might expect, out of clipped articles and collections of edited texts like Henry Hedge's *Prose Writers of Germany*. As Reynolds notes, Whitman owned the book by 1862, and probably knew of its second edition by 1852, or perhaps even as early as 1847, when it was originally published. He was accomplished enough in his reading to express his preference for Hegel and Schelling over Kant, feeling that the latter's philosophy had influenced Emerson too strongly in the direction of subjectivism.

If Whitman's reading reinforced his preoccupation with the objective details of the life of the body, then it is likely that reading Hegel bolstered the poet's relentless insistence on the synthesis of contradictory and antagonistic forces. Reynolds argues, for example, that some "elements of Hegelianism, such as an idealistic denial of the finality of evil, are present even in the original 1855 poems." By the late poems the cat was out of the bag, and in "Roaming in Thought (After Reading Hegel)" we encounter the poet's assertion that "the vast all that is call'd Evil I saw hastening to merge itself and become lost and dead." In this context, the city, as an American subject, represented a philosophical problem as well as an artistic one. The spirit of synthesis, obviously a part of Whitman's temperament but finding confirmation in a Hegelian worldview that suddenly appears very different from Emersonian transcendentalism, bore directly on the poet's resolution of this problem. The source of Whitman's art would lie in synthesis, and its immediate subject would be the extremes, contradictions, and antagonistic forces on the loose within the microcosm of New York.

To keep things in perspective, taking account of what Reynolds calls the "jingoism" of this enterprise is useful. In an attempt to follow the spirit of the *Democratic Review* and Young America, Whitman saw himself as helping to found a national literature, and as a consequence the attitude of *Leaves of Grass* toward America often seems overly celebratory and naïve. When he is selling America as a hot cultural property,

Whitman comes across as a combination of pitchman, barker, tent-preacher, and unwitting adjutant to the rhetoric of a Barnum or an O'Sullivan. Aside from its political ramifications in promoting Manifest Destiny and possibly stirring up nativism as well as nationalism, this rhetoric sometimes weakens the artistic force of Whitman's poetry, which occasionally around the edges has the whiff of the sickly sweet. There are many points in *Leaves of Grass*—such as "A Broadway Pageant," with its chanting for "the new empire grander than any before" and the "greater supremacy" of "America the mistress"—where one might wish for a dose of irony or the inoculation of Thoreau's skeptical outlook toward his country's image of itself.

It cannot be forgotten, though, that Whitman wrote of far more than New York, and that in doing so he often recapitulated the prevailing myths of the day: progress via westward expansionism and techno-industrial innovation. In *Democratic Vistas,* Whitman writes: "It may be argued that our republic is, in performance, really enacting to-day the grandest arts, poems, &c, by beating up the wilderness into fertile farms . . . railroads, ships, machinery, &c." Whitman's response, unlike Thoreau's, is very far from a flat rejection or opposition to such a beating. The poet does not speak up for the wilderness as such, even though he heartily approves, in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass,* of "the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance" of America. Indeed, he expresses his love for the vast spaces and natural wonders of America, the "magnitude of geography," the rivers, lakes, seas, coasts, forests, mountains, pastures, savannahs, uplands, prairies, and everything else that he can possibly imagine. Yet here it is the "vast masses" and "crowds" flowing into a "teeming nation of nations" that seem to excite him most, people rather than landscapes alone. For Thoreau, nature is sufficient in itself, and that self-sufficiency is perceived best in isolation, away from the town and the invasive species known as human beings. Whitman could not disagree more: "The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen."

What disturbs Whitman about the model of America defined principally by "railroads, ships, machinery, &c" is not so much the displacement of wilderness by civilization, but that art and poetry have been left out:

> I too hail those achievements with pride and joy: then answer that the soul of man will not with such only—nay, not with such at all—be finally satisfied; but needs what, (standing on these and on all things, as the feet stand on the ground,) is address'd to the loftiest, to itself alone.

If there is something overly optimistic, quasi-mythical, or even mirage-like about this view, suffice it to say that it also allowed Whitman to see through the carefully cultivated illusions about the superiority of country life that remain so deeply embedded in American intellectual life. In a searing passage, discovered by Kaplan, from one of the travel letters Whitman wrote for the New York *Sunday Dispatch,* the poet described the greasy diet of rural folk as "abominable" and their child labor practices as far too harsh. The "excessive fatigue" brought on by harvesting, in combination with smoking, chewing, and drinking, "breaks the constitution of many a boy and

young man." Whitman was aware that he was departing from the common stockpile of rural pictures: "no matter what moralists and metaphysicians may teach, *out of cities the human race does not expand and improvise so well morally, intellectually, or physically.*"

It is not that Whitman ignores the suffering and wickedness of city life, however. Rather, these aspects, too, are included within the all-embracing synthesis. *Leaves of Grass* is filled with what Baudelaire might have described in his own city musings as flowers of evil, except that the tones of mockery and vigorous disgust have been replaced by a quasi-mystical acceptance. It is not just Whitman's willingness to linger over the corpse of a prostitute in "The City Dead House" that is remarkable. It is his profound and stark refusal to condescend, to objectify or moralize the incident, perhaps taken from his days on the morgue beat as a newspaperman:

> I curious pause, for lo, a poor dead prostitute brought,
> Her corpse they deposit unclaim'd, it lies on the damp brick pavement,
> The divine woman, her body, I see the body, I look on it alone,
> That house once full of passion and beauty, all else I notice not,
> . . .
> Fair, fearful wreck—tenement of a soul—itself a soul,
> Unclaim'd, avoided house—take one breath from my tremulous lips.

This unwillingness to be revolted, this willingness to connect with the vile—Whitman's unwillingness to censor the moment and his willingness to include it in the poem of America—tell much. It is the obverse of the celebration of Broadway, and inscribed on the same American coin. The poem represents a determined communing with what America and New York have trampled and used and spat out; and Whitman finds that it is good and even beautiful ("all else I notice not"). The crucial, repeated word in the poem is "unclaim'd." This human encounter reflects the baggage of America that no one has remembered to pick up. The poem—this particular poem, and the implicit view of poetry contained within it, the purview of poetry's proper role and scope in America, and in what Whitman hopes will be the development of a national literary consciousness—is a vast act of sympathy that refuses to exclude. The prostitute's body is not a lifeless object to be entered and left for dead, but a "house" to be inhabited and dwelt in. It is a "tenement of a soul" and a "wreck," but not to be avoided for that reason—just the opposite.

*

Such a poem as "The City Dead House" simply cannot be written by an Emerson or a Thoreau (or a Baudelaire, for that matter). What brings it into being is an intellectual predisposition to the matter of New York City, joined with a more all-encompassing and radically pantheistic belief. In its imaginative effect, the city acts on America like a transplanted organ. Depending on the patient, it is either life-saving or fatal. Whereas Thoreau argues that a million men are of no importance compared with one man, Whitman tells us that each of those million people contains matter of import and is

a fit subject for epic treatment in national poetry. When Thoreau passes through a populous city, like Eliot later on, he sees faces, but not, by his own account, complete human beings. Whitman takes the same experience and swears the impossible, that he will never forget the stranger's face. In "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," Whitman hinted at "long trains of presuppositions, often entirely unmention'd by themselves," which sustain "all the old imaginative works." Such a train of *ideas,* and not simply feelings or intuitions, Whitman was hinting (although admittedly in the backward glance of retrospective wisdom), informed and generated *Leaves of Grass.* What were they? "Think of the United States to-day," he wrote, "the facts of these thirty-eight or forty empires solder'd in one—sixty or seventy millions of equals, with their lives, their passions, their future—these incalculable, modern, American, seething multitudes around us, of which we are inseparable parts!" Unlike Thoreau, Whitman not only accepted the multitude but he saw himself as standing inside rather than apart from it. The fact of his inclusion excited him; but here the poet also suggests that the "multitudinousness" itself amounted to a new philosophy, a new addition to what he called "certain controlling themes that seem endlessly appropriated to the poets." By embracing New York he had accepted America as something other than an errand into the wilderness and thrown the prevailing tradition off-kilter, disunified it or enlarged it, altering it fundamentally while expanding its scope. The radical nature of that gesture as an intellectual enterprise still remains incompletely understood. It is as though someone were explaining to us right now, patiently, but with evangelical zeal, that the real excitement and beauty in the world is not to be encountered in a forest walk but in the heart of Detroit or Trenton.

And yet for all this, Thoreau and Whitman, after their wary initial meeting in 1856, grew to respect one another. It was not so much that both men had been brought to a boil by Emerson and then later cooled on the man, though that is certainly true enough. The more fundamental recognition was that each acknowledged the other's defining Americanness. Americanness had been the theme of their first conversation, which started off on the wrong foot. Whitman said something about "representing America," and Thoreau later rendered his response as follows: he told Whitman "that I did not think much of America or of politics, and so on, which may have been somewhat of a damper to him [i.e., Whitman]."[3] Alcott described the men as "planted fast in reserves" throughout their two-hour discussion. Whitman bristled at a comment that suggested he had been misunderstood. Thoreau found the sensuality of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass,* which Whitman gave him at the meeting, provocative but somewhat distasteful.

As is the case after many such awkward first encounters between talented people, though, the reservations (and the reserve) dissipated once the two writers were separated and could contemplate one another's work without the interference of the real personality. For Thoreau, Whitman became "the most interesting fact to me at present" and "apparently the greatest democrat the world has seen." The

---

3. See Reynolds (*Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography,* 363–4) and Richardson (*Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind,* 348) for details of the meeting as seen through the eyes of each writer and for their subsequent comments about each other. My account relies on both biographies.

reservations on Whitman's side ran deeper because of Thoreau's fundamental distrust of humanity (not its individuals, necessarily, but its aggregate folly), which struck the poet as unacceptably aristocratic. Then again, Thoreau's contempt also extended to the idiotic critics who attacked *Leaves of Grass,* which made a more positive and lasting impression on Whitman. Thoreau carried the book around Concord "like a red flag," much to the embarrassment of his townsmen and the pleasure of Whitman, when reports filtered back. By 1888, the poet's attitude had completely softened. Thoreau was now "one of the native forces." He "belonged to America." He "looms up bigger and bigger," said Whitman, "his dying does not seem to have hurt him a bit: every year has added to his fame." Unlike Emerson, both men were artistically rebellious at heart, and this bound them. "One thing about Thoreau keeps him very near to me," Whitman said. "I refer to his lawlessness—his dissent—his going his own absolute road let hell blaze all it chooses."

Would it be too facile to see in this intellectual rapprochement a synthesis of opposites hinting at a way past the apparent mutual exclusivity of the dispositions of these two writers? Certainly, this would be a Whitmanesque conclusion, and one that runs the risk of oversimplification; it may also effectively ignore the uncompromising bedrock of Thoreau's thinking. Thoreau is not much inclined to accept, embrace, or tolerate, and that is, indeed, the ineradicable fact of his genius. To bring him into the fold is to betray him, and in that sense Whitman was right to call him lawless. At the same time that Thoreau seems cold and unforgiving, however, Whitman appears to have forgiven too much, absorbed too much Manifest Destiny, tolerated what is intolerable. What Whitman and Thoreau might be instead are two poles of interpretation needed to understand the matter of America, a thesis and antithesis without a synthesis. Choosing between them, tempting as such a choice might be when one is confronted with the boundless promise as well as the broken promises of America, may not be possible. Viewing them as representative Americans makes more sense: their ideas remain a stimulus to a growth of consciousness not yet achieved. That is, indeed, how they came to view themselves, not needing to deny each other's ideas even though the difference between them—as regards the city, and all that it implies—is impossible to surmount.

Another way to look at the matter would be to take the side of the city itself. That it gave Thoreau something to hate and Whitman something to love is in itself no small thing. New York brought everything together. It brought Whitman to Brooklyn and Thoreau to Staten Island. It brought Thoreau into contact with Henry James, Sr., and the literary world. It brought Whitman into the orbit of Young America. It brought Emerson to speak to Whitman and later brought Thoreau back to see Whitman after the poet had heard the voice of Emerson. In that sense alone, whatever one makes of the city, it serves its indispensable function as a sort of loom threading together lives and thought, or—shifting the analogy now—as a kind of intellectual atom-smasher hurling ideas together at immense velocity, with new lines of thought and disorienting discoveries resulting from the collision. This, too, is one of the possibilities generated by city life, by the complicated and chaotic accidental arrangement of human beings.