

AN AMERICAN EPIC: THE 1855 EDITION
OF LEAVES OF GRASS

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CHAPTER I

THE EPIC GENRE

Despite attempts by American poets from before the Revolution to adapt the epic to the setting of this continent, works which designated themselves by the title were, by the middle of the nineteenth century, in danger of becoming an archaic oddity. But on July 4, 1855, from within the green-bound, gold-trimmed covers of the first edition of Leaves of Grass emerged a work which seemed to be grand enough in scope at least to be considered as a member of the genre. Although Walt Whitman revised and enlarged his work during the following thirty-seven years, that original edition, albeit unpolished, comes closer to the epic genre than any other long American poem. The fact that the poet kept the 1855 edition as the core of his work and sought to improve it shows its importance to him, and its survival, as an epic-like work, where many more conventionally conceived attempts had failed is indicative of its significance to the country. As a candidate for the national epic, Leaves of Grass successfully adapted the qualities of the epic genre to this continent, and consequently stands, though roughly hewn, as the only worthy candidate of the nineteenth century for this role.

The definition of any genre, or the deliniation of its parts, is an elusive task. The very nature of such

categorization implies exceptions, and the breadth of a category such as epic multiplies the exceptions--both those which are extreme and those which lie in gray-shaded areas. In the first place, clarification of the term itself is necessary. E. M. W. Tillyard has claimed grounds for not equating epic poetry necessarily with heroic poetry and for attempting a definition of the epic which does not hinge on the requirement of heroism.¹ Heroic poetry, in Tillyard's words, is "narrative verse with a heroic subject belonging to the heroic age" and generally a pre-Darwinian phenomenon.² The epic, then, exists beyond mere heroic poetry. Yet any consideration of epic poetry must nonetheless recognize the awesome presence of the Homeric poems. The Iliad and The Odyssey stand as the traditional measure of any work of this genre. Indeed, the epics from European literature probably have made the greatest impression on the literary consciousness of the United States. Works associated with earlier European literary tradition include Virgil's Aeneid, the Germanic Nibelungenlied, and the Old English Beowulf; those associated with the Middle Ages, the Chanson du Roland and Cantar de Mio Cid are noteworthy. Finally, in the Renaissance, occur Dante's Divine Comedy, and Milton's Paradise Lost. These epics formed the

¹E. M. W. Tillyard, The English Epic and Its Background (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954), p. 5.

²Tillyard, p. 1.

primary background to American attempts during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the United States, however, efforts at writing an epic never seemed to reach fruition. Works were completed, but none matched either the expectations of the audience or the promise of the subject matter. In the literary community, there existed, during the years following the Revolutionary War, an opinion that the birth of the United States and the events leading up to a period of less than three centuries after the discovery of the North American Continent, constituted a series of events which, it was reasoned, must hold unlimited potential as the subject matter for a work of the epic genre. Indeed, the mood in the United States concerning the matter was almost one of impatience. In 1797, Philip Freneau explained:

Perhaps no other events in the history of man, as a subject of epic poetry, has equal claim on the exertion and animation of genius, with the emancipation of the western world. Poems of the epic strain that have been handed down from the remote periods of antiquity, are founded on a comparatively narrow basis.

Freneau continued by observing the relative insignificance of the occasions of The Iliad, The Odyssey and The Aeneid. Such events as the abduction of a woman, the return from war of a soldier, and the transfer of a colony seem paltry in the light of the glorious mastery of the wilderness and the establishment of a great nation. If events such as these could inspire men to write masterpieces revered by

mankind for centuries, why might not the events in the New World have far greater possibilities for the epic genre.

If the genius of such authors as Homer and Virgil, could aggrandize events, even in those limited times, of no great moment in the eye of the historian, so as to render them immortal in the memory of mankind, by the 'magic of song,' how much the more should this sublime incident of our own times, the AMERICAN REVOLUTION, awaken genius, and enable it to transmit to posterity . . . this STORY OF FAME, this real Revolution, which, in its consequences, includes no less in the general condition of man, than a transfer from tyranny to slavery, and subjugation, to the benignity of rational government, equal liberty, and the advancement of that temporal felicity designed for man by Nature, while a resident in this sphere of her creation.³

That the United States should not have been the subject of an epic poem seemed unthinkable. For not only did such a celebration seem warranted, it was also thought to be absolutely necessary. Donald M. Foerster observes that the literary community in the United States came to crave cultural as well as political independence from Europe. The solution to this was a distinct literary tradition which would mirror the new democracy.⁴ The epic seemed to be a missing cornerstone.

Attempts were made to adapt native material to the form; yet none were adequate. In 1772, Freneau and a

³From an essay in Time-Piece (October 9, 1797) quoted in Lewis Leary, That Rascal Freneau (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1941), pp. 295-296.

⁴Donald M. Foerster, The Fortunes of Epic Poetry (The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), p. 83.

classmate, Hugh Henry Brackenridge published "A Poem on the Rising Glory of America," a lengthy poem not entirely worthy of consideration as an epic yet nevertheless notable as a reflection of American aspirations. Some years later, in 1785, full of hope for a successful use of the genre, Timothy Dwight published his thinly veiled allegory, Conquest of Canaan. The work is full of many epic elements, but the humble servant of George Washington, as Dwight refers to himself in the prefatory remarks, to whom the work is dedicated, was unable to sustain the work and failed in his venture. Two years later Joel Barlow attempted an epic flight in "Vision of Columbus," a work which he revised and published, twenty years later, as the Columbiad. This latter work was hopefully to be the long-awaited American epic, equalling the ancients in glory, comparable to the work of Homer and Virgil. The Columbiad, too, was a failure. It was attacked mercilessly by the critics and, unfortunately, deserved the criticism it received. Part of the difficulty was that the goal of both the audience and the authors had been to create a heroic rather than an epic poem, though this distinction remained, generally, unrecognized until much later. In 1855, two notable works were published, Longfellow's "Hiawatha" and Whitman's Leaves of Grass, both of which were largely unsuccessful in filling the need held by post Revolution America for a national epic. Indeed, by 1867, James Russell Lowell, could remark

sarcastically, concerning earlier expectations by many of the coming of the great "American Poet," that "it was resolved that a poet should come out of the West [ie. America], fashioned on a scale somewhat proportioned to our geographical pretensions." He continues pointedly:

By him at last the epos of the New World was to be fitly sung, the great tragi-comedy of democracy put upon the stage for all time. It was a cheap vision, for it cost no thought; and, like all judicious prophecy, it muffled itself from criticism in the loose drapery of its terms. Till the advent of this splendid apparition, who should dare affirm positively that he would never come? that, indeed, he was impossible? And yet his impossibility was demonstrable, nevertheless.⁵

Lowell's scorn for this apparently empty myth was rationally based. He explained:

The novel aspects of life under our novel conditions may give some freshness of color to our literature; but democracy itself, which may seem to regard as the necessary Lucina of some new poetic birth, is altogether too abstract an influence to serve for any such purpose.⁶

Lowell's statement came twelve years after the first appearance of Leaves of Grass, a work which caused such an uproar that Lowell must have known of Whitman's work. In the ensuing years, Walt Whitman's book has been called an epic, though seldom with accompanying justification, and those who have so considered Leaves of Grass have used the Deathbed Edition as their example. What Lowell and others

⁵James Russell Lowell, Literary Essays, Volume II (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1892), p. 149.

⁶Lowell, p. 151.

seem to have overlooked is that Leaves of Grass in its earliest version may have been a deliberate attempt at an American epic, and, moreover, that it may have succeeded!

If the epic is a distinct entity, with qualities beyond those of heroic poetry, where do the exact boundaries of the genre of epic poetry lie? Traditionally, the epic is defined, primarily, in terms of the Homeric epics. It is conventionally delineated as a long, narrative poem in an elevated style with a vast setting and a central character who, through the action of the work, proves himself to be of heroic proportions in character and prowess. The plot often involves supernatural elements, and the action is important to a nation, religion, or some other distinct group of people. A description such as this also usually includes the special conventions which often are employed by the epic writer. That is, an epic poet usually opens by stating his theme and invoking a Muse to inspire and guide him. He usually opens in the middle of the action and then explains by later exposition the action which preceded his opening. There are catalogues of individual warriors, of armies, and of fleets. As another typical feature the epic poet usually includes long, formal speeches by the principal characters and makes frequent use of the epic simile. A still further common epic device is repetition which is used conventionally in the form of the stock epitaph, which consists of a brief description

of a characteristic of a major character or group of people, and which is usually repeated whenever reference is made to that individual or group. Another distinct usage, primarily evident in primitive epics, is the repetition of entire passages. If the epic poet had successfully described a scene or solved a complication in the plot, his method would be repeated, sometimes ver batum. Such repetition was not only convenient but also effective in evoking or alluding to the earlier situation. Such a definition as that given thus provides a method for classifying a work. Thus, whether or not a poem is an epic depends upon, first, whether it fits general description and, secondly, whether it reflects the various conventions of the form. Yet such an empirical approach to the definition of the epic genre is convenient but incomplete.

As a matter of fact, seldom, if ever, does a genre have fixed borders; there are simply foci about which the genre takes shape. Hence, identifying these centers more adequately defines the genre than do any systematic criteria. A work which is also an epic will thus embody or include these norms. Moreover, generally speaking, any epic will overlap any other epic at these points at least. Two fairly recent works which have attempted to identify these focal points are E. M. W. Tillyard's The English Epic and Its Background and Thomas Greene's The Descent from Heaven: A Study in Epic Continuity. It is significant that they

have arrived at a similar set of "epic norms" as Greene calls them: the standards, which in the following discussion, will be those by which Leaves of Grass will be judged.⁷

The first of these foci or norms has to do with the scope or limits of the work: an epic must be expansive. As Greene states:

the epic universe is there to be invaded by the human will and imagination. . . . Epic characteristically refuses to be hemmed in, in time as well as space; it raids the unknown and colonizes it. It is the imagination's manifesto, proclaiming the range of its grasp, or else it is the dream of the will, indulging its fantasies of power.⁸

This corresponds to the "second epic requirement" of Tillyard, who states that this quality "can be roughed out by vague words like amplitude, breadth, inclusiveness, and so on."⁹ This scope does not consist of mere bulk for

⁷ Although numerous studies related to the epic genre have been written, these two works deal less with external features than do others. Tillyard and Greene explore the essential character of the epic. Among other considerations which examine the genre both historically and critically are C. M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1952); Kate Milner Rabb, National Epics (1896; rpt. Freeport, N. Y.: Books For Libraries Press, 1969); Albert Cook, The Classic Line: A Study in Epic Poetry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966); and John Clark, A History of Epic Poetry (Post Virgilian) (New York: Haskell House, 1964).

⁸ Thomas Greene, The Descent from Heaven: A Study in Epic Continuity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 10.

⁹ Tillyard, p. 6.

length is, of itself, no virtue to the epic. What the epic does include is the significant characteristic. Yet, as Tillyard explains,

It will not tolerate amplitude for its own sake; it is not content with an undifferentiated and unorganized display of life's many phenomena. . . [The] epic must select, arrange, and organize.¹⁰

This extensiveness of epic, this breadth of scope, is thus unified by the limitations imposed by the imagery of the work. Greene observes that, in both the epic simile and larger units of description, the imagery fills its own space--the impression "tends to be in itself a miniature, complete action."¹¹ Greene calls these larger units of description "arch-images," which are welded to the action they contain. He continues, "the real movement of the poem is from one arch-image to another, and its vital force depends greatly upon their richness and flow."¹² The episodic development corresponds to the concatenation of these larger images. Explaining this, Greene states that the epic is comprised of "strong image" episodes, the arch images, and "weak image" episodes, the transitional units. A portion of the poet's task is to balance these suitably--an aspect which will be examined in greater detail in a later consideration of the structure of an epic. The epic must

¹⁰Tillyard, p. 8.

¹¹Greene, p. 11.

¹²Greene, p. 12.

be broadly inclusive but not arbitrarily so, and its expansiveness held together by the boundaries of the included episodes. The first epic norm is, consequently, that of expansiveness.

The expansiveness of the epic and its control are echoed in the nature of the central figure. The hero must be greater than human but not beyond humanity: he must be superhuman but not suprahuman. The control of the epic breadth in relation to the epic hero is a result not of the hero's control over the scope of the epic but rather of the conflict implicit in his nature, the struggle between his greatness and his limitations. Greene comments that the "epic is the poem which replaces divine worship with humanistic awe, awe for the act which is prodigious but yet human"¹³--a fact which creates a paradox: the hero is endowed with greatness above all men, yet he is not outside the limits of humanity. Greene continues:

It does not matter that, in practice, the poet occasionally describes heroic action which is beyond human powers, if the hero is understood to be subject to ignorance or foolhardiness and above all to death. The most important recognition scenes in epic are not between two people but between the hero and his mortality.¹⁴

Here, then, is the heroic dilemma: capable of superhuman feats, the epic hero must accept human frailties.

¹³Greene, p. 14.

¹⁴Greene, p. 15.

The heroic act, that event or series of events by which the hero is identified for what he is, must be actual, specific, and definite. As noted by Greene, "However profound its moral implication, . . . it must certify itself in the world of space and time, the world which the eye can see or the inner eye imagine."¹⁵ This test which identifies the hero, which "induces heroic awe," must be accomplished by the hero alone or, on occasion, by the hero accompanied by a few companions; it is a "situation which tests not only strength but courage and will. . . ."¹⁶ Tillyard is speaking of these same qualities when he states,

Heroic poetry often concerns actions in which men know exactly what they are doing and rise through deliberate valour to a great height of resolution.¹⁷

Yet, while epic poetry is in actuality distinct from heroic poetry, the heroic act is nevertheless the action by which the greatness of the hero is ascertained. Epic poetry cannot be only a landscape; there must be a central character worthy in his actions of that setting. It is this type of action to which Greene refers when he adds,

At the heart of the epic is tangible reality, swiftly apprehended, simple with the simplicity of violence and of wonder. The complexity which many poems attain must organize itself around that stabilizing concreteness.¹⁸

¹⁵Greene, p. 16.

¹⁶Greene, p. 15.

¹⁷Tillyard, p. 11.

¹⁸Greene, p. 16.

The heroic act is the basic means by which the central character establishes himself as greater than human, as a heroic or epic figure. He is worthy of the praise of his comrades and his nation.

Further, the epic hero is worthy of praise not only because of the nature of the act or acts which he has performed, but also because his act was for the community or nation. Greene comments that the "hero must be acting for the community, the City; he may incarnate the city, but he must be nonetheless an individual with a name."¹⁹ Tillyard, commenting on the necessarily similar nature of the poet, states that "the epic writer must be centered in the normal. . . . Granted the fundamental sanity, the wider the epic poet's mental span, the better."²⁰ Both Greene and Tillyard mean much the same thing when the former asserts the necessity that the hero act for a community, and the latter, the necessity that the writer must act for a community. In Tillyard's words, "The epic writer must express the feelings of a large group of people living in or near his own time."²¹ But on this point, neither Tillyard nor Greene intend to imply that the epic must or should be merely nationalistic. Though, in both cases, the subject

¹⁹Greene, p. 15.

²⁰Tillyard, p. 8.

²¹Tillyard, p. 12.

matter of the epic will be of great interest either to a certain group of people living at the time of the epic or to a group of people who in some way relate themselves to that aforementioned group. As Tillyard puts it--

We can simplify even further and say no more than that the epic must communicate the feeling of what it was like to be alive at the time. But that feeling must include the condition that behind the epic author is a big multitude of men of whose most serious convictions and dear habits he is the mouthpiece.²²

In Greene's words the hero "may incarnate the city." As both Tillyard and Greene suggest, in the traditional epic, the hero followed a code. In admiring the hero, his audience, both in the poem and out showed a admiration for his code. As Tillyard points out, this sort of identification is the choric element of epic poetry:

Epic must have faith in the system of beliefs or way of life it bears witness to. . . . Only when people have faith in their own age can they include the maximum of life in their vision and exert their will-power to its utmost capacity.²³

Implicit in this statement is the fact that in the traditional epic the epic hero, usually represents and acts in behalf of a community of people. In this respect, the hero is the creation of the epic poet and often serves as his mouthpiece--just in the same manner, as Tillyard notes, that the epic poet must serve as a mouthpiece of a large

²²Tillyard, p. 12.

²³Tillyard, p. 13.

group of people. This representation by the epic hero and the subsequent identification of others with him is, to borrow Tillyard's term the choric element of the epic.

The epic hero must be a distinct personage. For this reason he must have a name. As Greene comments, this apparently small detail is most significant:

A man's name is very important in heroic poetry; it becomes equal to the sum of his accomplishments. It is always assumed that a man's action is knowable and is known, and is known to be his. (Hence the importance of the heroic poet within his own world.) It is important that every combatant who is killed in the Iliad have a name, for the name is an index to the victor's accomplishment.²⁴

The importance of his name reflects the importance which the epic hero has acquired: it marks the increasing heights of his greatness. Greene states further:

His life as a hero is devoted to informing his name with meaning. . . . He is impelled to act, and, as action among men is agonistic, he is plunged into a contest of areté, virtus, capacity--a struggle to impose his being on his world. He can do this by demonstrating his control over a piece of his world To remain a hero he must continue to demonstrate control, and so his career imitates the expansiveness of the epic imagination. But at the end of that movement, implicitly or explicitly, his inescapable limitations await him.²⁵

The epic hero is thus constantly striving to assert himself, yet he is continually faced with his limitation, his humanity. His drive is thus directed not toward authoritative power but rather towards the terminal or initial change. Greene notes again:

²⁴Greene, p. 16.

²⁵Greene, p. 16.

This distinction, where it exists, between the director and the executor of action reflects the two-fold concern of politics--the establishment of control through violence and the right use of control in government. The focus in epic is upon violence rather than administration, but violence needs some frame of ulterior meaning.²⁶

In the political sense, the epic hero is concerned with the action of establishing control. Through perspective, the results of this occasion may be shown to the reader, but, primarily, this is not the concern of the epic. Greene summarizes:

Action is most fully realized through changes of institutions of regimes, changes which extend its consequences throughout society and throughout time. Thus the epic is the great poem of beginnings and endings.²⁷

Finally, the epic hero is assertive. His task or heroic act usually is concerned, politically, with establishing or returning order to a situation; yet, at the same time, this action is part of his attempt, personally, to prove his heroic viability. This effort is the cause of the humanistic awe in which others hold him. The hero is held in awe as something enormous and extraordinary yet, by the same token, human: he is almost divine but falls short.

Any work containing such a distinctive character in such a vast setting must struggle to cohere. The epic must consequently be carefully structured; this is the

²⁶Greene, p. 19.

²⁷Greene, p. 19.

third focal point of the epic, its structure. The structure reinforces the difference between action and consequence and thereby enhances both the activities of the hero and the subsequent events as well. It has already been noted how the imagery of the epic tends to balance its expansiveness. Similarly, one goal of the epic writer is to relate a chain of individual, concrete scenes.²⁸ Greene asserts that, basically, there are two types of scenes in the epic. These, in general, correspond to the episodes of action and consequence. The first type of scene is, in Greene's terminology, the "executive scene." He states:

it contains the agon, the struggle between capacity and limitation, the vital cruxes of the narrative. It is not only high keyed emotively, but since imagistic intensity in the epic tends to accompany emotive intensity, it is the more brilliant and showy; it is always a strong image episode. It contains the crises in which violence occurs, virtus is tested, the deed is accomplished, the terror confronted, the name enhanced.²⁹

This type of episode deals with the actions of the hero. The weak-image episode is generally related to the second kind of scene, the "deliberative scene."³⁰ This type of scene is concerned with the results of the scenes of action. It assesses the action from a perspective which would be difficult for the participants, in their close proximity

²⁸Greene, p. 19.

²⁹Greene, p. 20.

³⁰Greene, p. 20.

to the events, to enjoy. The effect of these deliberative scenes is to put into focus the deeds of the hero. Greene comments that the "striking thing is that the deliberative episode is used so consistently in preference to simple exposition." He concludes that the epic poet prefers using a scene which the reader can appreciate visually in his imagination.³¹ There may be, however, need for more reinforcing. As Greene states:

But when historical perspective needs particular emphasis, then the deliberative presentation is dropped and some other means of heightened visualization is found. This may be a pageant vision of the future Or it may be a work of art representing remote events--conventional bas-reliefs, woven hangings, or decorated shields.³²

This additional type of device may be used; however, the deliberative scene, generally, is sufficient. The executive scene containing the actions of the hero and the deliberative scenes evaluating those actions are the two basic motifs from which the epic poet builds his work. The goal is to balance the two. Clarifying this point, Greene states:

Some balance between action as spectacle, as geste, as object of awe, and action as political events seems necessary to epic. When the balance tips too far either way, the poem participates so much the less in the epic mode.³³

Of the two modes, neither episodes of action nor assessment should dominate. Tillyard refers to the necessity of "a

³¹Greene, p. 20.

³²Greene, pp. 20-21.

³³Greene, p. 21.

control commensurate with the amount included," as follows:

That indeed is the structural ideal: that the whole, however long, should remain fluid and unset til the last word has been written, that the writer should have everything simultaneously in mind and keep it open to modification throughout the process of composition. This must remain an ideal, for no man has possessed the powers of memory and control necessary to fulfil it And one should not exclude from all possibilities of epic success a work that settles its parts as it goes along, provided it makes one part truly evolve out of the others, provided it retains a general recollection of what has gone before.³⁴

The fluidity which Tillyard suggests as the ideal of the epic poet is the means of assuring balance. The writer, if he approaches this goal, is able to adjust and, hence, to balance his work until the final moment of its completion. Finally, concerning the form of the epic, it is significant to note that Greene implies its general accordance with the traditional epic definition; that is, the epic must be narrative: Tillyard on the other hand, feels that the epic need not be "necessarily in the form of a narrative where the concatenation of sequent events holds a large proportion of the reader's interest." As he points out:

When an age holds one kind of opinion on the nature of man, the heroic story may best represent the current metaphysic. But other forms may suit other ages the choric nature of the epic does not dictate any rigidly answering form.³⁵

³⁴Tillyard, p. 9.

³⁵Tillyard, p. 13.

Yet Tillyard's assertion that the epic need not be narrative does not lead to open license; rather, there exists a reasonable possibility of other forms for the epic. The structuring of the epic is perhaps the most difficult problem of the epic poet.

Yet a work may fully satisfy the three previously listed norms or foci of the epic genre and still not be epic. In addition, the epic has a sense of exuberance and excitement which is not subdued by, but rather channeled through, a certain dignity. Concerning this quality, Greene states: "Upon it depends, really, the humanistic awe, the maraviglia, for that which quickens the self but surpasses the self."³⁶ He explains that it is,

the superabundant vitality which charges character and image and action alike. Without it the most carefully plotted work is as dust and ashes. It is a quality of the imagination which imparts life to men and things through words, the quality possessed preeminently by the poet of the Iliad. You sense in Achilles his measureless reserves of living power, his inexhaustible capacity for fury; you sense them equally whether he is active or at rest. To create that sense is the work of the epic imagination, and it must be done without effort; it must be done with language which is unstrained.³⁷

If the epic poet achieves this, Greene continues, he has obliterated any need to develop the personality of his hero. Greene calls this quality "heroic energy"; Tillyard, the "heroic impression." This factor is a quality of

³⁶Greene, p. 23.

³⁷Greene, pp. 22-23.

heroic poetry but not necessarily of that domain alone.

Tillyard notes that,

it is natural enough to attribute the heroic impression to a poem's heroic subject matter. But in fact that impression depends also, indeed ultimately, on the temper of the treatment. A heroic theme may encourage a writer to treat it in a sustained, "heroic" way, to exercise his will to the utmost; but this does not prevent the treatment's being the decisive element.³⁸

This quality is necessary to any member of the epic genre; though eminent, its presence is not a foregone conclusion in any long, dramatically exciting poem. It results from the poet's art in the use of language in the poem.

If the epic is to produce this heroic energy, there must be an appropriate language; neither the plot nor any other means can convey such exuberance. The result is that if the language of an epic does not carry this weight, any heroic tone produced is artificial. Greene provides some historical perspective:

The living impulse of heroic verse stems from a discovery about language which must have been made very early in human history, perhaps as early as language was used. . . . This was the discovery that language can do more than denote, that it can possess, exercise, invoke, bind with a spell, that it has magical, demonic properties transcending its concern with statement. The fearful demonic god in words . . . is there in all the primitive compositions we know. The heroic poet made use of him, and with time he learned to restrain the demon. . . . But happily he never tamed the demon altogether The creature who possesses and binds is at work still within the poet's marvelous chant. That

³⁸Tillyard, p. 11.

for the poet is the fundamental task--to tether the creature but not to hobble him.³⁹

This quality of words beyond denotation is one of the chief sources of the heroic energy. But a second quality also exists, in addition, as Greene notes:

There is a second quality, inherent in the feeling proper to epic: its language must become, in whatever way the poet finds, the language of awe It must remind the audience that the story told is no ordinary story, concerning no ordinary men; it must withdraw into its heroic remoteness, with its own uncommon rhythms and diction and tropes It must remain the expression of the ritual community, the collective City of man. The language must emulate the weight of the story with its own austere solemnity.⁴⁰

Greene further states that this is the quality which critics have often called the "high style" of the epic. Tillyard is also aware of this almost religious tone of epic language:

The first epic requirement is the simple one of high quality and of high seriousness. It is just conceivable, though superlatively improbable, that the other conditions required to give the epic effect could be fulfilled by mediocre means. Hence the need to insist that the writer of epic must use words in a very distinguished way.⁴¹

The language of epic must be formal but never presumptuous. The poet, as Greene asserts, must conduct the reader; he must be "the messenger, the guide, who is inspired and inspires in turn."⁴²

³⁹Greene, pp. 23-24.

⁴⁰Greene, p. 24.

⁴¹Tillyard, pp. 5-6.

⁴²Greene, p. 25.

The principal foci of the epic, then are fourfold. The epic must be expansive--unbounded by either space or time. The hero must inspire humanistic awe and must have a choric nature--must act for the community. The epic must relate the action of the hero yet balance this with perspective to convey the importance of that action. Finally, the epic must convey a heroic impression through its language. These focal points define, as much as any set of characteristics can, the epic genre. They will constitute in this study, the measure for evaluating Whitman's effort.

That Whitman had an epic or an epic-like poem in mind in the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass is suggested by the work's well-known preface; in the second paragraph of the 1855 Preface, Whitman sets the epic tone--"Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes"; three paragraphs later, he writes that of the new breed of American poets, "a bard is to be commensurate with a people." Indeed, in many respects the Preface constitutes a set of rubrics for writing an epic suitable for nineteenth century America. Whitman's poem deserves to be judged ultimately as epic, and his first published edition, unrefined as it stands, is the work closest to his original impulses. The first edition of Leaves of Grass may yet be the unrecognized progenitor and perhaps the only true example of the epic genre in American writing.

CHAPTER II

EPIC CHARACTERISTICS OF
"SONG OF MYSELF"

The 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass was comprised of twelve untitled poems. Each of these was untitled except for the repetition of the title of the volume at the head of the page. To the casual observer, this arrangement might indicate that the poetic work was intended to be one long poem, with its divisions clearly separated by the author in order to emphasize the distinctness of each segment. Quite to the contrary, the first edition of the Leaves is a series of separate poems; though, as a unit, they do form a single poetic sequence. In that edition, "Song of Myself," the initial poem accounts for approximately half of the poetry which filled the work. In style and subject matter it is one of the most distinctive poems produced in America. Because of its length, and its significance to any consideration of Whitman, "Song of Myself" will be considered separately in reference to the qualities of the epic genre. The other eleven poems and their relationship to both this poem and to the epic itself will be examined in a subsequent chapter of this study.

The epic must be expansive: this is the first norm or focus of the genre. The imagination asserts itself partially by means of the expanse of the work. The creative

desire of the epic poet is satisfied by, as Greene termed it, invading and colonizing unknown space. The question of breadth was appreciated by Whitman. In the 1855 Preface, he remarks:

the greatest poet brings the spirit of any or all events and passions and scenes and persons some more and some less to bear on your individual character as you hear or read. . . . Past and present and future are not disjoined but joined. The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is.¹

This "greatest poet" was to be not only all-inclusive of occurrences, feelings and people, but also unconstrained by time and space. Early in Leaves of Grass, in what was later entitled "Song of Myself," Whitman set the perspective, "Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth much?"² The implied answer to these questions is, of course, that if one has felt the earth and its parts as something of immensity, his perspective is simply inadequate to attain a true grasp of the actual immensities involved. In contrast, the persona of the poem, as part of the World Soul,³ participates in everything that

¹Walter Whitman, Leaves of Grass (1855; facsimile rept. New York: The Eakins Press, 1966), p. vi. All subsequent references will be to this text unless otherwise indicated.

²"Song of Myself," 1. 22.

³Briefly, panpsychism, the system of belief which Whitman espoused, asserts that all tangible objects are identities, manifestations, of the World Soul, the all-pervading essence of being. Individual beings are transient yet the essence of each entity is eternal. Associated with

currently is proclaiming that he is, "of every hue and trade and rank, of every cast and religion."⁴ Yet such diversity in the present is still not adequate measure.

There must be universals:

These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands,
 they are not original with me,
 If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or
 next to nothing,
 If they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing,
 If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle
 they are nothing,
 If they are not, just as close as they are distant they
 are nothing.⁵

Walt Whitman, the persona of the poem, both uses the past and encompasses the present. Quite succinctly, he affirms, "I am an acme of things accomplished, and I am closer to things to be."⁶ He had earlier advised, "Encompass worlds but never try to encompass me."⁷ Thus Whitman, the persona, unbounded by either space or time, is not only the epitome but also the pinnacle of all things present and past. Though not the best possible being, perhaps, he is nonetheless, the best of all possible beings of the present. He summarizes

such an interpretation is the poet's belief in a form of evolutionary amelioration. For a more substantial explication of Whitman's cosmology, see Gay Wilson Allen, *Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1946).

⁴"Song of Myself," l. 343.

⁵Ibid., ll. 353-357.

⁶Ibid., l. 1148.

⁷Ibid., l. 579.

his inclusiveness and quality in the following statement; "I know I have the best of time and space--and that I was never measured, and never will be measured."⁸ He was aware of his expansiveness and of the expansiveness of his book. Whitman recognized that people who were not initiated into awareness of the World Soul would see apparent contradictions in his poetry; therefore, he attempted to answer them. Thus he declares:

Do I contradict myself?
 Very well then. . . . I contradict myself.
 I am large. . . . I contain multitudes.⁹

He recognized the paradoxical nature of such inclusiveness; yet he recognized as well its resolution in terms of the doctrines of the World Soul. Yet this extensiveness in the character of the persona is given check by his imagery. As Greene has suggested, the imagery subdues in space and time the freedom of the epic imagination. Each image is limited in scope; this factor constitutes a holding action imposing restraints upon the epic. Greene concentrates his discussion on "arch-images"; however, the episodic balance, of which Greene speaks, will be discussed later. The expansiveness of the epic genre is established in "Song of Myself" by the diversity of the persona and the breadth of the setting.

⁸Ibid., 1 1198.

⁹Ibid., 11. 1314-1316.

The nature of the epic hero is most distinguished by its greatness. The persona of "Song of Myself" and the coming breed of heroes whom he anticipates surpass the greatness with which most men are familiar. In order to emphasize the point, Whitman asks two questions, immediately posing the answer: "Have you outstript the rest? Are you the President?/It is a trifle. . . . they will more than arrive there every one, and still pass on."¹⁰ The comparison in this instance of an undefined state of greatness to a great person is significant because the protagonist, as an example of a new class of heroic persons, is human. As described by Whitman, he is distinguished by his unique character:

The friendly and flowing savage. . . . Who is he?
Is he waiting for civilization or past it and mastering it?

Is he [the persona] some southwesterner raised outdoors?
Is he canadian?

Is he from the Mississippi country? or from Iowa,
Oregon or California? or from the mountain? or
prairie life or bush-life? or from the sea?

Wherever he goes men and women accept and desire him,
They desire he should like them and touch them speak
to them and stay with them.

Behavior lawless as snow-flakes. . . . words simple as
grass. . . . uncombed head and laughter and naivete;
Slowstepping feet and the common features, and the
common modes and emanations,
They descend in new forms from the tips of his fingers,
They are wafted with the odor of his body or breath. . . .
they fly out of the glance of his eyes.¹¹

¹⁰Ibid., 11. 432-433.

¹¹Ibid., 11. 974-983.

Whitman's meaning here carries the implication of his belief in the previously-considered universality of epic potential. The persona's geographical background is unimportant. But he is both accepted and desired; his nature is charismatic. He is "lawless" but "simple." He is "common." "Song of Myself" also contains a similar description of a negro driving a team of horses in a stone works:

"Steady and tall he stands poised" with "ample neck and breast"; the sunlight "falls on the black of his polish'd and perfect limbs." He is a picturesque giant."¹² This description echoes the physical power of the heroes in most European epics. Concerning the American poet, he wrote in the Preface:

Here comes one among the wellbeloved stonecutters and plans with decision and science and sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms.¹³

The persona, the American vates,¹⁴ is the creator of new forms. Again, Whitman remarks in the Preface:

A heroic person walks at his ease through and out of that custom or precedent or authority that suits him not. . . . [He] is greatest forever and forever who contributes the greatest original practical example.¹⁵

¹²Ibid., ll. 219-224.

¹³Preface, p. iv.

¹⁴The Latin term vates, seer or prophet, refers to the tradition of the religious poets whose verse is oracular or prophetic.

¹⁵Preface, p. vii.

The epic hero is thus able to put off that which does not serve him well and to initiate that which, for him, is appropriate. In the initial poem of the 1855 edition, Whitman continues with this same prefatory idea although he is somewhat surprised at the profundity of his own power:

The day getting ready for me when I shall do as much
good as the best, and be as prodigious,
Guessing[,] when I am[,] it will not tickle me much
to receive puffs out of pulpit or print;
By my life-bumps! becoming already a creator!¹⁶

The incredulity suggested here at the same time tends to reinforce the humanity of the epic protagonist. He is unable to control his excitement over the implications of his greatness. But, overall, he is above humanity. He is aware that he represents one of an infinite number of identities of the World Soul; he can state that, "The weakest and shallowest is deathless with me"¹⁷; and further expounds upon the idea:

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy what-
ever I touch or am touched from;
The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than
prayer,
This head is more than churches or bibles or
creeds.¹⁸

The persona is above humanity because he is part of the World Soul. Yet, at the same time, is distinct from this

¹⁶"Song of Myself," ll. 1046-1048.

¹⁷Ibid., l. 1076.

¹⁸Ibid., ll. 526-528.

float. The difference is that he understands this true nature of life; he is aware. "I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself;/ They do not know how immortal, but I know."¹⁹ He is furthermore the creator of a new outlook on life:

Magnifying and applying come I,
 Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,
 The most they offer for mankind and eternity [is]
 less than a spirit of my own seminal wet,
 Taking myself the exact dimension of Jehovah and
 laying them away,
 Lithographing Kronos and Zeus his son, and
 Hercules his grandson,
 Buying drafts of Osiris and Isis and Belus and
 Brahma and Adonai,
 In my portfolio placing Manito loose, and Allah on
 a leaf, and the crucifix engraved,
 With Odin, and the hideous-faced Mexitli, and all
 idols and images,
 Honestly taking them all for what they are worth,
 and not a cent more,
 Admitting they were alive and did the work of their
 day,
 Admitting they bore mites as for unfledged birds who
 have now to rise and fly and sing for themselves,
 Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out
 better in myself. . . . bestowing them freely
 on each man and woman I see,
 Discovering as much or more in a framer framing a
 house.²⁰

By such statements, Whitman becomes in effect the promulgator of a new gospel; he is a prophet--an American vates. He is the "acme of things accomplished" who understands that everything is invested with the World Soul, who appreciates the duality of identity and soul in each object

¹⁹Ibid., ll. 128-129.

²⁰Ibid., ll. 1020-1032.

or being. He stands above ordinary men, but he is not beyond humanity. He uses the past, he adapts it to the present, and he points to the future. He recognizes the divinity of even a carpenter. It is significant that the new breed of democratic heroes, of which the protagonist is the prototype, are not to be only American. They are to be, "Not merely of the New World but of Africa Europe or Asia."²¹ The persona is representative of these heroes, and he personifies their future struggles between their greatness and their limitations.

As noted, Greene considers the epic to be "the poem which replaces divine worship with humanistic awe." In this respect, Whitman endowed his protagonist with the magnificence necessary to cause such awe in men. The protagonist was aware of this splendor: proudly, but not overtly so, he declares,

I know I am august,
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be
understood,
I see that the elementary laws never apologize,
I reckon I behave no prouder than the level I plant
my house by after all.²²

He himself is convinced of his superb nature; but, Greene's statement implies, the persona must also inspire awe in others. This he does effortlessly:

Writing and talk do not prove me,
I carry the plenum of proof and everything else in
my face,

²¹ "Song of Myself," l. 344.

²² Ibid., ll. 409-412.

With the hush of my lips I confound the topmost
skeptic.²³

This man--who is more than human--is extraordinary, and this is recognized by him and by those who confront him. The heroic dilemma is that the hero is capable of super-human feats; yet, he must accept human frailties. Greene, as previously observed, considers scenes of recognition "between the hero and his mortality" to be the most important in the epic. The persona of "Song of Myself," because of his belief in the World Soul, has no fear of death, but he is confronted by the weaknesses of his humanity. He is assailed by his own exuberant capacity of speech to explain every--perhaps tedious--detail of his religious philosophy to the letter. His speech, he declares "provokes me forever,/It says sarcastically, Walt, you understand enough. . . . why don't you let it out then?"²⁴ Later in the poem, after he has wandered from the subject of his primary concern, he admits, "I discover myself on a verge of the usual mistake."²⁵ At the end of the poem, the persona is accosted for his propensity towards tarrying: "The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me. . . . he complains of my gab and my loitering."²⁶ Although these

²³ Ibid., ll. 581-583.

²⁴ Ibid., ll. 569-570.

²⁵ Ibid., l. 957.

²⁶ Ibid., l. 1321.

instances of confrontation suggest the exaggeration of humor, they nonetheless reinforce the humanity of the hero. Yet for the protagonist of Leaves of Grass, the sobriety of having human weaknesses is relatively insignificant for he is, after all, the epitome of all previous creation; he is infused with the World Soul: he is one of its identities. But implicit in the nature of this state of being is the possibility of his imperfection as one such identity. But such a situation is natural and not lamentable. The nature of the epic hero, that he is above humanity but not beyond its limitations, is embodied through his actions.

The heroic act is that event or series of events by which the hero identifies himself. In "Song of Myself," however, it is difficult to distinguish between the actual persona and the poet for whom he speaks. Walt Whitman, the persona, is a separate, even if ill-defined, entity. He is the figure who, much more than Whitman the actual poet, assumes the role of the American vates--struggling with the nation that he both represents and strives to guide. In the Preface, Whitman states:

Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings[,]
necessarily blind to particulars and details[,]
magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the
hospitality which forever indicates heroes. . . .
Here are the roughs and beards and space and ²⁷
reggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves.

²⁷preface, p. iii.

Some dramatic figure is needed to promote this democratic ideal. The vatic protagonist fills this need. Through his struggle recounted in the poems, he has gained his confidence in this role:

Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through
 fog with linguists and contenders,
 I have no mockings or arguments. . . . I witness
 and wait.²⁸

The certainty is echoed numerous times. For example, the hero asserts,

I exist as I am, that is enough,
 If no other in the world be aware I sit content,
 And if each and all be aware I sit content.²⁹

Yet the endeavor of the hero is, to some extent, physically passive. He strives not to conquer but to convince, to make men aware of the spiritually equal nature of life, the democracy of the World Soul. He proclaims,

Endless unfolding of words of ages!
 And mine a word of the modern. . . . a word en masse.

A word of the faith that never balks.
 One time as good as another time. . . . here or
 henceforward it is all the same to me.

A word of reality. . . . materialism first and last
 imbuing.
 Hurrah for positive science! Long live exact
 demonstration!

The poet then takes notice of several men of science, after which he directs this statement of explanation to them:

Gentlemen I receive you, and attach and clasp hands
 with you,
 The facts are useful and real. . . . they are not

²⁸"Song of Myself," ll. 71-72.

²⁹Ibid., ll. 413-415.

my dwelling. . . . I enter by them to an area
of the dwelling.

I am less the reminder of property or qualities,
and more the reminder of life,
And go on the square for my own sake and for
other's sake,
And make short account of neuters and geldings, and
favor men and women fully equipped.³⁰

In proclaiming this idealistic democracy, Whitman asserts, in this passage, the importance of the identities, of "materialism" and science. He explains, however, that it is through the realm of identities that he perceives the World Soul. As the American prophet expounding the true nature of being, in this continuing struggle, the protagonist describes himself, in this passage, with vocabulary which is as heroic as is the spirit.

I troop forth replenished with supreme power, one
of an average unending procession,
We walk the roads of Ohio and Massachusetts and
Virginia and Wisconsin and New York and New
Orleans and Texas and Montreal and San Fran-
cisco and Charleston and Savannah and Mexico,
Inland and by the seacoast and boundary lines. . . .
and we pass the boundary lines.
Our swift ordinances are on their way over the
whole earth,
The blossoms we wear in our hats are the growth of
two thousand years.³¹

In this geography, these exploits, he covers the entire North American continent. He troops forth in a procession, taking cognizance of all boundary lines. In his use of the word "ordinances," Whitman was probably thinking of

³⁰ Ibid., ll. 483-502.

³¹ Ibid., ll. 964-968.

"ordinances," a fact borne out by the motif which precedes it.³² Thus, not only does the poet in this section describe a persona who is striving to assert his democratic idealism but one who may also be employing military tactics to this end--a factor traditionally associated with the heroic efforts described in epics. The "average unending procession" of which he is a part, his democratic army, is composed of his followers, his disciples--"Elevés I salute you."³³ This force is comprised of equals under the American vates as commander. To an individual, he later declares, "I do not ask who you are. . . . that is not important to me,/You can do nothing and be nothing but what I will infold you."³⁴ In another segment of the poem, the persona states,

I tramp a perpetual journey,
 My signs are a rain-proof coat and good shoes and
 a staff cut from the woods;
 No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,
 I have no chair, nor church nor philosophy;
 I lead no man to a dinner-table or library or
 exchange.³⁵

Although the journey is that of a prophet, this description of the protagonist evokes the plight of the wanderings of

³²For example, in the line which immediately precedes this quotation, "The corpses rise. . . . the gashes heal. . . ." the imagery connotes a battle, a military encounter.

³³"Song of Myself," l. 969.

³⁴Ibid., ll. 997-998.

³⁵Ibid., ll. 1199-1203.

Odysseus, hero of The Odyssey. At least the struggle of the American vates, the epic hero, is so concretely presented in "Song of Myself." Although his task is not accomplished strictly alone, the persona is nonetheless the leader, the initiator of the action. Deliberately and with dedication, he guides the growing numbers of his troops. It is through this action that he establishes himself as worthy of the praise of his peers.³⁶ The vatic poet, the protagonist, acts in a heroic manner, though the clarity of this fact may be obscured since it is difficult to adapt the basically lyric form of the poem to the traditional narrative pattern of the epic.

The persona also acts heroically at another level in the poem. Vicariously, the hero participates in various events. He becomes each individual that he observes or senses. At the conclusion of the lengthiest catalogue in the first poem of the 1855 edition, the hero proclaims, "And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,/And such as it is to be of these more or less am I."³⁷ The importance of this statement to the understanding of the protagonist's participation in each event he encounters is reinforced by the fact that this statement occurs at the end of the catalogue which later became

³⁶This previously discussed aspect is exemplified by lines 978 and 979.

³⁷"Song of Myself," ll. 324-325.

Section 15 of "Song of Myself" which constitutes probably the most famous of Whitman's catalogues. Throughout the poem, the hero encounters situations which seem no more than common; yet, even these are significant. As he explains, ". . . there is no trade or employment but the young man following it may become a hero."³⁸ Although the range of experiences which the poet includes span most of nineteenth-century America, and although each of these is, by his definition, subject enough for heroic action, certain instances cited seem more traditionally in keeping with the epic genre.

The protagonist of "Song of Myself" experiences vicariously situations involving much greater expenditure of energy than might be associated with the more or less passive struggle of his role as the American vates. This sympathetic participation at times seems almost to reflect the heroic activities of some of the folk heroes of the day, Davy Crockett and others.³⁹ Descriptions of the "roughs" occur throughout the poem. At one point, the protagonist declares,

Alone far in the wilds and mountains I hunt,
Wandering amazed at my own lightness and glee,
In the late afternoon choosing a safe spot to
pass the night,

³⁸Ibid., l. 1268.

³⁹See Robert H. Woodward, "Davy Crockett: Whitman's 'Friendly and Flowing Savage,'" VI, Number 3 (September, 1960), Walt Whitman Review, pp. 48-49.

Kindling a fire and broiling the freshkilled
 game,
 Soundly falling asleep on the gathered leaves, my
 dog and gun by my side.⁴⁰

As he participates in the turkey shoot, the protagonist is described in the following manner:

The western turkey-shooting draws old and young.
 . . . some lean on their rifles, some sit on
 logs,
 Out from the crowd steps the marksman and takes
 his position and levels his piece.⁴¹

Implied in these two descriptions is the self-sufficient nature of an individual who is knowledgable in his vocation and physically suited to it in more than adequate proportions.

In the Preface of the first edition, Whitman emphasized the importance of action; yet, he de-emphasized the importance of any accompanying victory. The following example from the Preface is both concise and typical of Whitman's attitude towards heroic action in this sense:

The prudence of the greatest poet. . . . knows
 that the young man who composedly periled his life
 and lost it has done exceedingly well for himself,
 while the man who has not periled his life and
 retains it to old age in riches and ease has per-
 haps achieved nothing for himself worth mention-
 ing. . . .⁴²

That person who risks his total being in action is the one who is truly heroic; for inherent in this concept is that

⁴⁰ "Song of Myself," ll. 168-172.

⁴¹ Ibid., ll. 276-277.

⁴² Preface, p. xi.

the action be in accord with the principles of being, with the nature of the World Soul. Moreover, if a man acts in behalf of others, so much the better. For example,

The runaway slave came to my house and stopped
 outside,
 I heard his motions crackling twigs of the woodpile,
 Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw
 him limpsey and weak,
 And went where he sat on a log, and led him in and
 assured him,
 And brought water and filled a tub for his sweated
 body and bruised feet,
 And gave him a room that entered from my own, and
 gave him some coarse clean clothes,
 And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes
 and his awkwardness,
 And remember putting plasters on the galls of his
 neck and ankles;
 He staid with me a week before he was recuperated
 and passed north,
 I had him sit next me at the table. . . . my
 firelock leaned in the corner.⁴³

The persona, vicariously participating in this situation, aids a runaway slave--an action not without danger to himself. He nurses the man's sores and treats him as an equal. He protects the man during the day by keeping his rifle near and at night by letting him sleep in a room whose only entrance was through his room.

As the protagonist, again, he engages in the actions of battles--and not only as a leader:

I am an old artillerist, and tell of some fort's
 bombardment. . . . and am there again.

Again the reveille of drummers. . . . again the
 attacking cannon and mortars and howitzers,
 Again the attacked send their cannon responsive.

I take part. . . . I see and hear the whole,
 The cries and curses and roar. . . . the plaudits
 for well aimed shots,
 The ambulanza slowly passing and trailing its red
 drip,
 Workmen searching after damages and to make in-
 dispensable repairs,
 The fall of grenades through the rent roof. . . .
 the fan-shaped explosion,
 The whizz of limbs heads stone wood and iron high
 in the air.

Again gurgles the mouth of my dying general. . . .
 he furiously waves with his hand,
 He gasps through the clot. . . . Mind not me. . . .
 mind the entrenchments.⁴⁴

The remembering and the original action are both experi-
 enced by the persons. The scene begins somewhat objectively
 in recollection, but his increasing involvement shifts the
 experience into the subjectivity of witnessing his mortally
 wounded commander issue a final order. Similar violence
 and risk are also sympathetically confronted by the hero
 in the identity of a sea captain:

How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless
 wreck of the steamship, and death chasing
 it up and down the storm,
 How he knuckled tight and gave not back one inch,
 and was faithful of days and faithful of
 nights,
 And chalked in large letters on a board, Be of
 good cheer, We will not desert you;
 How he saved the drifting company at last,
 How the lank loose-gowned women looked when
 boated from the side of their prepared
 graves,
 How the silent old-faced infants, and lifted sick,

⁴⁴ Ibid., ll. 853-863.

and the sharplipped unshaven men;
 All this I swallow and it tastes good. . . .
 I like it well, and it becomes mine,
 I am the man. . . . I suffered. . . . I was
 there.⁴⁵

The captain braves the storm "for days and nights," his strength giving courage to those stranded on the second, crippled ship, and finally rescuing them. The heroic act is experienced, is vicariously performed, by the epic hero, the persona. The poet Whitman even relates the massacre at Goliad, Texas, as well as the battle which won fame for John Paul Jones. The former is "the tale of the jetblack sunrise"⁴⁶ in which the persona seems to slip into the role of an old man telling a story to his grandchildren. In the episode of the Bonhomme Richard,⁴⁷ the opening is the same; yet the narrator becomes a part of the action. Again, the implication is of the protagonist participating in each event just as he has in every other.

It is both interesting and, in terms of Whitman's belief in the World Soul, significant that he emphasizes neither victory nor defeat in the episodes in which the persona is involved. In the Preface, he wrote:

The pride of the United States leaves the wealth and finesse of the critics and all returns of commerce and agriculture and all the magnitude of

⁴⁵ Ibid., ll. 820-827.

⁴⁶ Ibid., ll. 866 ff.

⁴⁷ Ibid., ll. 890-932.

geography or shows of exterior victory to enjoy
 the breed of full-sized man unconquerable and
 simple.⁴⁸

Although the emphasis of this passage is on the American
vates and his followers, it is important to notice that the
 poet's categorization shuns physical victory as being
 equally superficial with wealth and commerce. To the per-
 sona, the World Soul is important and its recognition by
 humanity is important; therefore, by comparison, winning
 or losing a battle is insignificant:

I play not a march for victors only. . . . I play
 great marches for conquered and slain persons.

Have you heard that it was good to gain the day?
 I also say it is good to fall. . . . battles are
 lost in the same spirit in which they are won.⁴⁹

Not the results, but the risk and action are the important
 aspects and measures of a heroic life. A refugee is por-
 trayed by Whitman as competing in a race.

The hounded slave that flags in the race and leans
 by the fence, blowing and covered with sweat,
 The twinges that sting like needles his legs and
 neck,
 The murderous buckshot and bullets,
 All these I feel or am.

I am the hounded slave. . . . I wince at the bite
 of the dogs,
 Hell and despair are upon me. . . . crack and
 again crack the marksmen,
 I clutch the rails of the fence. . . . my gore
 dribs thinned with the ooze of my skin,
 I fall on the weeds and stones,
 The riders spur their unwilling horses and haul
 close,

⁴⁸preface, pp. iii-iv.

⁴⁹"Song of Myself," ll. 366-368.

They taunt my dizzy ears. . . . they beat me
violently over the head with their whip-
stocks.⁵⁰

As much as in any portion of "Song of Myself," Whitman here conveys the actual participation of the protagonist in the occurrences of the poem. He accomplishes a similar feat as he describes the dying fireman whose soul is separate from his dying body. He is aware of the rescuers trying to reach him, of their attempts to revive him, and of the gathered crowd which surrounds his battered body like the hands and dial of a clock circled about its center.

I am the mashed fireman with breastbone broken. . . .
tumbling walls burried me in their debris,
Heat and smoke I inspired. . . . I heard the
yelling shouts of my comrades,
I heard the distant click of their picks and shovels;
They have cleared away. . . . they tenderly lift
me forth.

I lie in the night air in my red shirt. . . . the
pervading hush is for my sake,
Painless after all I lie, exhausted but not so
unhappy,
White and beautiful are the faces around me. . . .
the heads are bared of their fire-caps,
The kneeling crowd fades with the light of the
torches.

Distant and dead resuscitate,
They show as the dial or move as the hands of
me. . . . and I am the clock myself.⁵¹

Just as any man has the potential to be heroic, any act can be heroic. To Whitman, victory or defeat, glory or lack of it, is therefore unimportant. A western hunter is just as

⁵⁰Ibid., ll. 830-839.

⁵¹Ibid., ll. 843-852.

heroic a figure as a city fireman. The American vates, the persona of the poem, is equally heroic in his struggle to proclaim his prophetic message and in his vicarious participation in every situation which he encounters. In both of these levels of heroism, his actions are measurable and real; he acts singly, or as a significant part of a group; and he thereby proves himself worthy of praise.

The epic hero is worthy of this praise for another reason; he acts for the community. This is, to borrow the term which Tillyard uses somewhat more narrowly, the choric element of the epic. In the Preface, Whitman declared this belief:

The American Poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them [the American poets] a bard is to be commensurate with a people. . . . His spirit responds to his country's spirit. . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes.⁵²

Whitman's statement involves ambiguity in two ways as a result of the inherent ambiguity between Whitman as poet and Whitman as persona. First, in the literary context of Leaves of Grass, the persona, the American vatic poet, is the "bard" who is to equal the country; in the second place, Whitman, in his own experience as an American citizen and as an avowed national poet is also in his own actual person the bard equal to the country. Against this fact, the individual requirements which both Greene and Tillyard assert

⁵²Preface, p. iv.

are satisfied. When Greene comments that the hero must act for the community, that he may even "incarnate the community," he has almost paraphrased Whitman. When Tillyard states, on the other hand, that "the epic writer must express the feelings" of a large, chronologically concurrent group of people; and that "the epic must communicate the feeling of what it was like to be alive at that time," he has precisely described one of the functions which Whitman the literary person fulfills. Thus not only was Whitman the singer of democracy but he was also possibly the most notable social biographer of life in nineteenth-century America.

The choric quality of the epic is basically centered in the epic hero. The epic hero is the creation of the epic writer and, thereby, to at least some extent, acts for the writer. Therefore, if the epic setting is generally concurrent with the life of the writer, it makes little difference whether the writer or the hero is choric. This is the case with Leaves of Grass, where in one instance, the persona reflects the feelings of the people in his own person:

The weakest and shallowest is deathless with me,
 What I do and say the same waits for them,
 Every thought that flounders in me the same
 flounders in them.⁵³

Or in another, he visualizes himself dramatically, hearing himself calling out in the midst of crowds of fellows:

⁵³"Song of Myself," ll. 1076-1078.

. . . . A call in the midst of the crowd,
My own voice, orotund sweeping and final.

Come my children,
Come my boys and girls, and my women and household
and intimates,
Now the performer launches his nerve. . . . he has
passed his prelude on the reeds within.

Easily written loosefingere d chords! I feel the
thrum of their climax and close.

My head evolves on my neck,
Music rolls, but not from the organ. . . . folks⁵⁴
are around me, they are no household of mine.

The vatic poet speaks thus not only to, but also for, the crowd, the community. This choric quality, the identification of a large group with the epic hero is also reflected in the heroic code--those principles which form the ethic of the poem. In the eighth paragraph of the Preface, Whitman lists a number of axioms for the bard. Basically, the items which the poet includes fall into three sections of what, for all practical purposes, is the code by which the persona of "Song of Myself" lives. The bard must, first of all, have respect for other identities of the World Soul; he must regard them as equal to himself or, put in a slightly different manner, equal to his own identity. Secondly, he must act to support this equality with his own life. Finally, the bard must recognize the divinity of each individual as an identity infused with the World Soul. The final three axioms in the list, although they vary slightly from this code nonetheless direct the

⁵⁴Ibid., ll. 1050-1057.

individual's attention to it:

read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and ⁵⁵in every motion and joint of your body. . . .

These three axioms--(1) Read Leaves of Grass regularly; (2) Re-examine all your previous beliefs; and (3) Dismiss whatever displeases your own soul--indicate: first, the importance of the American vates, the persona, and of Walt Whitman, the poet, as the indicators of the reality of the nature of being; and, secondly, the importance of each individual as a part of the World Soul. The protagonist of "Song of Myself" thus encompasses both the people and the spirit of his time.

The epic hero must, further, be a distinct person who asserts himself as an individual even though he is acting for others. Greene, as noted earlier, explains the importance of a man's name in the epic because it becomes equal to his greatness, his actions. In the 1855 version of "Song of Myself," the name of the persona, although not included in the opening lines, where such identification might be assumed to be important, is placed in a clear dramatic context when it does finally appear.

⁵⁵Preface, p. vi.

Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a
 Kosmos,
 Disorderly fleshy and sensual. . . . eating drink-
 ing and breeding,
 No sentimentalist. . . . no stander above men and
 women or apart from them. . . . no more modest
 than immodest.⁵⁶

This brazen introduction of the historical Whitman into the poem, thereby giving the hero-persona a name, both reveals the pride of the hero and provides him a name which, as Greene points out, he will strive to fill with meaning. Greene also refers to the protagonist's life as, to an extent, choiceless; the hero is impelled to "struggle to impose his being on the world." The same situation is true of the battle of the American vatic poet to establish his panpsychic teachings. The latter this drive which is evidenced in the actions of the hero is, in the epic poem, emphasized more than the results of the drive. Or, in Greene's terminology, the epic is concerned with establishing control through a concentrated energy, often leading to violence, rather than with the administration of that control. The impetus of the American vates in Whitman's poem is certainly to establish the validity of his religious philosophy in all men, whatever the end result of it will be. Or it may be said that this is his primary concern. He also knows what its significance in terms of America's future is to be. This particular question is important

⁵⁶"Song of Myself," ll. 499-501.

because, as Greene states, the violence, or action, "needs some frame of ulterior meaning." Each of the events in which the persona acts is related to the present and future expansion of the American nation as an ideal democracy great in spirit and in power. Whitman's concern with the ultimate outcome of American democracy rather than the administrative details is summarized by Gay Wilson Allen:

As a young man he tried to work with parties and politicians, but finding them lacking in foresight, courage, and even honesty, he decided that it was useless to expect reforms through them. To a certain extent he may have been right, for as a poet and independent thinker he almost certainly went further by going his own way.⁵⁷

Whitman in his own person directed himself towards the achievement of an absolute democracy based on the equality of all in the World Soul. This is also the goal of the protagonist in the poem. In this quest, he is determined and persistent: he states, "[I] am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless. . . . and can never be shaken away."⁵⁸

He is also patient and confident:

One world is aware, and by far the largest to me, and
that is myself,
And whether I come to my own today or in ten thousand
or ten million years,
I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness
I can wait.

My foothold is tenoned and mortised in granite.

The struggle of the hero-persona is to prove the nature of

⁵⁷Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1946), p. 370.

⁵⁸"Song of Myself," l. 139.

reality, to prove what is. Again, Allen summarizes quite precisely:

The attempt to indicate the path between reality and the soul very nearly sums up Whitman's whole intention in Leaves of Grass. It might, indeed, be called the "religious intention" which he so many times mentions in his prefaces.⁵⁹

This religious intention is what the hero-persona attempts to proclaim. The problem is in finding how to achieve this;

Logic and sermons never convince,
The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul.

Only what proves itself to every man and woman is so,
Only what nobody denies is so.⁶⁰

"The path between reality and the soul" is thus proven only by itself. But if this is true, what specific value is left for the protagonist? He tries to explain but is unable; "Behold I do not give lectures or a little charity, / What I give I give out of myself."⁶¹ The clearest role of the hero of "Song of Myself" is thus to act, to live, his message and, thereby, to proclaim it. He explains how the effort will be continued and how he accomplishes his task.

I am the teacher of athletes,
He that by me spreads a wider breast than my own
proves the width of my own,
He most honors my style who learns under it to
destroy the teacher.⁶²

⁵⁹Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook, p. 285.

⁶⁰"Song of Myself," ll. 652-655.

⁶¹Ibid., ll. 991-992.

⁶²Ibid., ll. 1231-1233.

The followers, the disciples, of the vates prove him by destroying him, by taking his place and going beyond his limits. If they do not add to his action in this way, he will have failed; but progress must continue and progress will continue. The struggle of the hero, his continuous effort to gain control, is perhaps best expressed in terms of personal procreant power: "On women fit for conception I start bigger and nimbler babes,/ This day I am jetting the stuff of far more arrogant republics."⁶³

As has been said, the subject of the epic genre is the act of the achievement of control, not administration: "the epic is the great poem of beginnings and endings." This statement may at first seem to be antithetical to the protagonist's view: "But I do not talk of beginning or the end."⁶⁴ But the beginnings and ends here are in a religious, not a political context. Actually, he is speaking of continuous beginnings and endings of Identities:

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;
And will never be any more perfection than there
 is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.⁶⁵

This passage, of course, concerns the World Soul. "Song of Myself" is the portion of Whitman's epic which describes

⁶³ Ibid., ll. 1001-1002.

⁶⁴ Ibid., l. 31.

⁶⁵ Ibid., ll. 32-35.

the effort of the protagonist to proclaim this reality to the world. His persistent attempts to achieve this end assert him and identify him as epic hero.

As such, the protagonist of the first published version of "Song of Myself" is of heroic proportions: yet he is superhuman, not suprahuman. His heroism is proved through two levels of action. As the American vates, he strives to communicate his religious philosophy to others, and, as the vicarious combatant, he acts both directly and indirectly to apply this philosophy. The hero acts for, indeed embodies, the whole of man as represented by nineteenth century America: he is choric in nature. Finally, he persistently asserts himself, and he prevails. "Song of Myself" thus encompasses the second focus, the second epic norm--the epic hero.

The coherence of an epic, according to another focus, restrains the freedom of the hero and the vastness of the setting: a cohesiveness achieved through the structure of the work. This is the third of the major epic requirements--structure. In the initial poem of the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, due to the nature of the work, the structure is difficult to analyze because of the everpresent danger of imposing form rather than discerning it which menaces every critic. Numerous schemes have been proposed to account for the structure of the poem. Such interpretations may be useful; however, for the consideration of

Leaves of Grass as an epic, it should be noted that the structure of "Song of Myself" acts as a supportive form in the manner that a skeleton supports the physical components of a vertebrate. The frame is sheathed by muscles, sinews and skin. But whereas the skeletal intricacies of a vertebrate must be examined by dissection, such detailed anatomical analysis is not necessary in evaluating "Song of Myself" in terms of the epic--since the basic dimensions of its configuration are sufficient.

The version of "Song of Myself" which Whitman published untitled in 1855 falls into four major divisions, each roughly equal in length. The first division or "lay" ends with the fifth strophe on the twenty-fourth page of the first edition, a point corresponding to what was later the division between the seventeenth and eighteenth sections of the poem. The second lay ends after the third strophe on page thirty-five, at the end of section thirty-two; the third, at the end of the catalogue which fills more than half of the forty-sixth page, after section forty-one. The final lay is comprised of the remainder of the poem. The composition of each of these divisions will be considered later; for the present, the establishment of the presence of these four lays is sufficient. Overall, the poem's basic mode is lyrical; however, "Song of Myself" is not without narrative characteristics. First, the poem is ordered: the sequential arrangement of lines, strophes and larger segments

within the poem is a necessary one; to make a major alteration in the order would be to damage the poem. The narrative element is implicit rather than dominant and may be seen in individual episodes such as the accounts of the slaughter at Goliad, "the jetblack sunrise," and of the Bonhomme Richard, "the old time sea fight." This narrative strain in individual episodes occurs primarily in the first and third lays from which the above are taken.

Structurally, these four divisions or chants are balanced. The composition of the first and third lays can be most easily examined in terms of the executive and the deliberative types of episodes. Whitman's use, however, differs somewhat from Greene's conception of these two types of scenes: for Whitman's executive scene contains the action through which the hero reveals himself. As has been previously discussed, Whitman redefined the term heroic as applied to action. The action by which the hero is proven need not, according to Whitman, be either physical or military. Thus, whereas the persona vicariously participates in individual events which vary from the apparently mundane to the more traditionally heroic, such as the scene aboard the Bonhomme Richard, the heroic struggle of the protagonist as the American vates is, physically, more passive. Nonetheless, the executive scene, where Whitman, the poet, uses it, serves as a major vehicle for the heroic revelation and the replacing of "divine worship

with humanistic awe." Whitman habitually uses the executive scene when he is disclosing the heroic nature of the persona through his sympathetic participation in individual encounters. These scenes are comprised of richer images, often quite fully expanded yet also often of very brief glimpses, as the vignettes--activities presented in the catalogues. These short frames have the same photographic quality that the Imagist poets were to strive for in the early years of the twentieth century. Whitman's executive scenes are also highly charged emotionally. This lyric intensity is achieved in a variety of scenes, ranging from the account of the massacre at Goliad to the more subdued passion of the spinster watching the twenty-eight swimmers. Each of these becomes what Greene refers to as an "arch image." The more completely developed scenes form "strong image" episodes while the imagistic mass of the catalogues form individual, complete scenes which are unified in the manner of a Brueghel painting, in a panorama of detail with almost every figure subject enough for closer examination but, cumulatively, forming a single vision. The executive scene is thus balanced by the "deliberative scene."

As outlined by Greene, the "deliberative scene" is concerned with the results of the scenes of action. It assesses the significance of the action, generally from a historical perspective. Whitman uses this kind of scene to evaluate the action of the persona and to explain how

and why he acts as he does. Greene, as has been earlier noted, mentions the somewhat unusual fact that the deliberative episodes in the epic are often used instead of simple exposition. Whitman's lyric style, whether or not it is a carryover from his newspaper work, is often distinctly expository in nature. It is also pertinent to remember Greene's comment that particular emphasis may, in an epic, be given to particular actions by some other device, such as a vision of the future. Whitman actually used this device in the Centennial, 1876 edition, of Leaves of Grass when he included "Prayer of Columbus." Whitman's balance of these two types of scenes will be examined shortly.

First, however, it is necessary to examine the type of writing which marks both the second and the final lay of "Song of Myself," which are neither executive nor deliberative in nature, rather, containing elements of both. This distinct approach to the epic is the result of the fact of the special nature of Whitman's epic hero. The American vates must proclaim his message: he does so in the declarative episode. This type of episode contains the action of the persona not in vicarious participation but in the role of the American prophet of democracy. In the declarative episode, the protagonist is not predominantly political, but religious: he is the vates. The declarative scene is not as intensive as the executive scene, but it is a means by which the persona, the vatic poet, is identified; and

it contains his struggle to "impose his being on the world" --as Greene has stated it. The evaluative and explanatory nature of the deliberative scene is also part of the declarative episode, since Whitman's epic protagonist reveals himself through an extended, poetic proclamation. Whitman uses the declarative episode to express the feelings and ideas of the hero not in the formal exposition of extended, Homeric speeches but in the expository lyric which captured the spirit and hope, as well as the substance, of nineteenth-century America.

The construction of the epic lies in the balance of its parts while the movement, the progression is the result of the concatenation of episodes. As stated by Greene, "the real movement of the poem is from one arch-image to another, and its vital force depends greatly upon their richness and flow."⁶⁶ This, of course, is a valid approach for those sections or poems in which Whitman uses only executive and deliberative scenes. In the declarative episode, however, the entire section is more a single, extended scene or, more properly, a vantage point from which the protagonist addresses his audience. "Song of Myself" is not a simple narrative. In the Preface, the poet stated, "The cleanest expression is that which finds no sphere

⁶⁶Preface, p. vii.

worthy of itself and makes one."⁶⁷ This new expression of Whitman's is, in the initial poem of 1855, balanced, but it must be appraised in its epic significance in the light of its innovative nature.

The four lays which comprise "Song of Myself" alternate in their structural configuration, which we may now examine in a formal way, between the traditional episode composed of deliberative scenes balancing executive scenes and the extended declarative episode with its own internal structural balance. The first lay (later numerically noted as Sections 1 - 17) introduces the nature and character of the protagonist. Its initial twenty-nine lines constitute, as it were, an introduction to the poem, in the final strophe of which the reader is invited to join the persona, "Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems."⁶⁸ There then follows a deliberative section (ll. 30 - 139), in which the protagonist begins to explain and to evaluate in terms of concrete experience the nature of being: the duality of the World Soul and its infinite identities and the relationship between the soul and the identity of the persona. This episode balances the executive scene which follows it (ll. 140 - 245), which is comprised of a catalogue in which the persona is the "caresser of life" who experiences

⁶⁷"Song of Myself," l. 25.

⁶⁸Greene, p. 12.

lives as different as those of a deckhand on a "Yankee clipper" and a baby asleep in its cradle. Following this are a brief (ll. 246 - 256) deliberative interlude in which the protagonist pauses to further explain himself and a panoramic, executive scene (ll. 257 - 346). The lay is concluded with a deliberative section (ll. 347 - 364) which explains the universality of the various ideas previously expressed by the American vatic poet.

The second lay (Sections 18 - 32) is basically declarative. The American hero begins: "This hour I tell things in confidence,/I might not tell everyone but I will tell you"⁶⁹ and the proceeds to proclaim his message, in the process, identifying himself in his specific role as vates. In so doing, he first outlines the method he will use to evaluate the nature of being:

What is a man anyhow? What am I? and what are you?
 All I mark as my own you shall offset it⁷⁰ with your own,
 Else it were time lost listening to me.

In the process of measuring and examining himself, he thus investigates everyone. The revelation of the nature of the American vatic poet builds consecutively throughout this monologue as the persona proceeds to relate more about himself. "I am," he says,

⁶⁹ "Song of Myself," ll. 386-387.

⁷⁰ Ibid., ll. 390-392.

. . . the poet of the body,
 And I am the poet of the soul.

 I chant a new chant of dilation or pride,

 I show that size is only development.⁷¹

The revelation comes to its climax in the outright announcement by the protagonist that he is, "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos."⁷² The first lay has laid the groundwork by introducing the epic hero; the second now has built to this bold announcement; after which the rest of the poem--indeed, the entire remainder of Leaves of Grass--functions, as it were, as explication. The hero continues to reveal, to explain, and to prove himself; though--as Whitman is quick to point out--mere exposition is an inadequate medium:

Writing and talk do not prove me,
 I carry the plenum of proof and every thing else
 in my face,
 With the hush of my lips I confound the topmost
 skeptic.⁷³

It is for this reason that the persona drifts frequently in the declarative sections from the expository lyric into the simple lyric. Note, for example the portions of the poem concerning the daybreak (ll. 552 - 565) and the seduction of the persona by his overwhelming sense of touch (ll. 618ff).

⁷¹Ibid., ll. 422-431.

⁷²Ibid., l. 499.

⁷³Ibid., ll. 581-583.

Yet the declaration of the vates comes for brief moments surprisingly close, in view of Whitman's denial of the feasibility of that mode, to succinct exposition: for example, his statement that, "All truths wait in all things."⁷⁴ In other words, the epitome of truth in the universe is the World Soul: it is the ultimate being. Yet, the only way to perceive this truth lies in the identities which in materialistic guise, as "things," reflect. It is because of this fact that he can assert, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars."⁷⁵ The second lay thus constitutes the protagonist's declaration of the nature of man, the nature of the World Soul, and the relation between the two. This is, of course, the intent of the whole volume, yet each lay in "Song of Myself," by means of its own particular logic recapitulates the same basic truth. In such a continuing fashion, the poet carefully builds and reinforces his theme.

In the third lay (Sections 33 - 41), Whitman, the poet, again returns to using executive and deliberative episodes. The third lay is introduced with the realization by the persona of the profundity of the truth which he asserts and with a reference to a portion of the first lay (ll. 4 - 5). After these three lines which open the third lay, a series of executive scenes occurs. The first scene

⁷⁴Ibid., l. 647.

⁷⁵Ibid., l. 662.

is panoramic, consisting of another catalogue of images (ll. 715 - 804) which is introduced with mixed imagery of flying in a balloon and representing himself as a giant (ll. 712 - 714). In this catalogue, the persona shifts back and forth between the roles of observer and participant. The expansive activities of the protagonist continues to be illustrated in vicarious participation by the hero in a subsequent series of scenes which are more inherently epic. For example, he risks his life as the skipper aiding a stricken passenger ship; as a fugitive slave; as a mashed narrative strain; yet, each is basically lyric in quality. This truth is easily seen in two consecutive scenes--those occurring at Goliad and aboard the Bonhomme Richard. Each scene occurs over a period of time, roughly twenty-four hours in each case; however, the element of impression rather than that of action is dominant.

After these scenes, the persona in his own person as opposed to the identities which he sympathetically assumes, becomes increasingly more evident, more the emphasized protagonist of the poem. He concludes his account of his experiences, and the scene, with characteristically epic language, "I troop forth replenished with supreme power, one of an average unending procession."⁷⁶ This executive scene is balanced by a deliberative one, which brings the lay to its conclusion. In this deliberative

⁷⁶Ibid., l. 964.

scene (ll. 974 - 1049), the protagonist judges his role as the American vatic poet in terms of past heroes and prophets, the "old cautious hucksters,"⁷⁷ and assumes, rather formally, the role of the American prophet. At the beginning of the third lay, he had been, as he says, "Walking the old hills of Judea with the beautiful gentle god by my side."⁷⁸ This allusion is implicit in the final line of the lay; "Putting myself here and now to the ambushed womb of the shadows!"⁷⁹ This parallelism between the inception of Christ's career, and his own, adds impetus to the protagonist's mission suggesting his willful undertaking of the task. This formal acceptance concludes the third lay.

The final lay (Sections 42 - 51) of "Song of Myself" is declarative. In this lay, the proclamation is more formal than that presented in the second. For the protagonist has just assumed the role of vates, and this fourth lay contains his great message being, in essence, the summation of the poem and of his life. The setting at the opening of this lay reveals the persona almost as if he is quizzically observing himself, as if the soul were watching the actions of its identity: ". . . . A call in the midst of the crowd,/My own voice, orotund sweeping and

⁷⁷Ibid., l. 1021.

⁷⁸Ibid., l. 789.

⁷⁹Ibid., l. 1049.

final."⁸⁰ The purpose of the message, as it is now expressed, is the same as the early portions of the poem: "My words are words of a questioning, and to indicate reality."⁸¹ It is this task of revealing reality that the poet accomplishes. In concluding his lay, he reiterates the nature of the World Soul (ll. 1262 - 1308) and the nature of himself (ll. 1308 - 1320). In the passage that was later to become the final section of the poem, the persona restates the difficulty of expressing the nature of being, since the reality of the World Soul can only be understood if it is experienced. The epic protagonist of "Song of Myself," the American vatic poet, is the guide-- he is not a lecturer. As he states in the epitaph (ll. 1327 - 1336),

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass
I love,
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.⁸²

The four lays of "Song of Myself" are balanced in their composition so that the poem as a whole reveals a general impression of symmetry. Thus, the first and third lays are composed of executive scenes offset by deliberative episodes, and the second and fourth lays are made up of declarative material. No phase is allowed to dominate.

⁸⁰ Ibid., ll. 1050-1051.

⁸¹ Ibid., l. 1082.

⁸² Ibid., ll. 1329-1330.

Yet, the poem is not without progression, however. While the sequence of episodes and segments within the poem is not chronologically ordered nor unified by a traditional epic device such as a single journey of one individual, the sequence is the result of a controlled effort by the poet. Tillyard, as earlier noted, discusses the coherence of the episodes of the general epic form: the author, he suggests must "make one part truly evolve out of the others," provided that the poet "retains a general recollection of what has gone before." This flowing progression is achieved by Whitman. Another point made by Tillyard is that the epic need not be narrative. While "Song of Myself" has narrative elements, it is, nonetheless, dominantly lyrical. Whitman was aware that he was breaking or, more correctly, changing tradition. At the outset of the Preface to the 1855 edition, he asserted,

America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions . . .
 [America] accepts the lesson with calmness . . .
 perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house . . .
 perceives that it waits a little while in the door . . . that it was fittest for its days . . .
 that its action has descended to the stalwart and well-shaped heir who approaches . . . and that he shall be fittest for his days.⁸³

Nor does Whitman's perception end with his appreciation of the value of the past; Whitman had conceived of a new form

⁸³ Preface, p. iii.

for the democratic ethic:

For such the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic. Its quality goes through these to much more. Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted and their eras and characters be illustrated and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative and his vista.⁸⁴

In this passage, Whitman seems to deny his work the title of epic; yet when the question is scrutinized closely, it will be seen to be a matter of semantics. To Whitman, epic implied heroic poetry, and as already noted there is a distinction between the two. Walt Whitman was not a heroic poet; however, in writing "Song of Myself," he did write an epic poem.

The final focus of the epic genre is that "heroic energy" or a "heroic impression" must be conveyed by the work: a factor achieved not through plot or action but through the language. One of Whitman's contemporaries, Edgar Allan Poe, apparently would have explained this quality in the Iliad as lyric intensity, for Poe wrote, "In regard to the Iliad, we have, if not positive proof, at least very good reason for believing it [was] intended as a series of lyrics."⁸⁵ Lyric intensity would seem to be at least a partial explanation for the particular quality

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. iv.

⁸⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe with Selections from His Critical Writings, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn and Edward H. O'Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), II, p. 1022.

of Whitman's verse.

As a poet, Whitman strove to make his works vibrant. He explained this creation, this act of giving life, in the Preface:

The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into any thing that was before though small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe.⁸⁶

He elaborates upon this ideal:

But to speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside is the flawless triumph of art. If you have looked on him who has achieved it you have looked on one of the masters of the artists of all nations and times.⁸⁷

The vitality which Whitman achieved is most easily demonstrated by examination of that portion of his poetry in which this quality could be most easily lost, the catalogue.

In general, the intensity of a simple lyric is reached rapidly and subsides rapidly. Moreover, as Poe maintains, it is virtually impossible to sustain this emotional height in a long poem or through lengthy sections of a poem. This latter fact is observable in the rather lengthy catalogue which later became Section 15. Each image is distinct, though generally not completely developed: just as one facet of a Brueghel painting may not be as

⁸⁶ Preface, p. v.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. vii.

detailed as another in the painting. In their economy, in fact, they approach the sparse quality of imagery associated with the Imagist poets of some sixty years later. As a result, his vignettes are laconically suggestive and at the same time exhibiting a scintillating brilliance. Again, though brief, each of Whitman's images is thematically significant: viz.,

The carpenter dresses his plank. . . . the tongue
of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,
.
The malformed limbs are tied to the anatomist's
table,
What is removed drops horribly in a pail;
.
The connoisseur peers along the exhibition-gallery
with halfshut eyes bent sideways,
.
The regatta is spread on the bay. . . . how the
white sails sparkel!
.
The opium eater reclines with rigid head and just-
opened lips,
The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs
on her tipsy and pimpled neck,
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men
jeer and wink to each other.⁸⁸

And, the sustained energy of brilliant effect suggested in this passage continues through the entire catalogue. Another example of this lyric quality occurs near the end of the final declarative lay. The protagonist is struggling to express the nature of the World Soul.

There is that in me. . . . I do not know what it
is. . . . but I know it is in me.

⁸⁸ "Song of Myself," ll. 258, 270-271, 286, 296, 301-303.

Wrenched and sweaty. . . . calm and cool then my body
 becomes;
 I sleep. . . . I sleep long.

I do not know it. . . . it is without name. . . .
 it is a word unsaid,
 It is not in any dictionary or utterance or symbol.⁸⁹

This is Whitman at his best, as the master of that part of language which lies beyond its denotative meaning. His language illustrates quite adequately, Greene's conclusion, that with regard to poetic speech, the epic poet is "to tether the creature but not to hobble him." "Song of Myself" brims with the energy of the epic poem.

It should not be overlooked, however, that Whitman also uses heroic language--words and phrases which, traditionally, evoke epic actions. For example, in one portion of "Song of Myself," the protagonist's description of a sunrise amounts, in effect, to a heroic confrontation.⁹⁰ In asserting in this passage both the magnitude of the individual as part of the World Soul, and the equanimity of all identities, the persona stands up to the sun in its audacious advance:

Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs,

 The heaved challenge from the east that moment over
 my head,
 The mocking taunt, see then whether you shall be
 master!⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ibid., ll. 1299-1303.

⁹⁰ Ibid., ll. 552-565.

⁹¹ Ibid., ll. 557-561.

The initial image evokes, perhaps, the scene of a medieval army approaching with lances in the air, while the explicit taunt and challenge of the language imply that it is a personal heroic confrontation--possibly between two leaders. The result of this episode is that neither is killed; neither is greater than the other. This, then, thematically reinforces the equality of all identities. Whitman also uses heroic language in several other instances in "Song of Myself." The epic hero proclaims, "I launch all men and women forward with me into the unknown."⁹² The choice of this verb and its use connote an armada, whereas the uncertainty of the venture suggests something of the quality of Columbus' intrepid voyage. At another juncture, the protagonist declares, "I am a free companion. . . . I bivouac by invading watchfires."⁹³ The vocabulary clearly indicates a military operation.

Finally, it is significant that in the first two strophes of Leaves of Grass at least two epic conventions were employed. Like the traditional epic, the 1855 edition opens with a statement of the theme and an invocation:

I celebrate myself,
 And what I assume you shall assume,
 For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,

⁹²Ibid., l. 1134.

⁹³Ibid., l. 813.

I lean and loafe at my ease. . . . observing a
spear of summer grass.⁹⁴

In the first strophe, he announces the central theme of "Song of Myself" and, by extension, the theme of the entire volume. In the second, he invites his own soul, a part of the World Soul, to join in the experience of the poem. And as casual though it is, this invitation echoes the form and intent of the epic invocation.

By the measure of the four epic foci--expansiveness, central hero, structure, and energy--"Song of Myself" is indeed an epic. Although the first poem of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* is not the traditional, narrative epic, but Whitman correctly assessed the achievement of his epic venture when he declares:

. . . he is greatest forever and forever who contributes the greatest original practical example. The cleanest expression is that which finds no sphere worthy of itself and makes one.⁹⁵

⁹⁴Ibid., ll. 1-5.

⁹⁵Preface, p. vii.

CHAPTER III

THE SMALLER "LEAVES"

The eleven poems which follow "Song of Myself" in the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass are, thematically, an extension of the initial poem. Moreover, not only do these poems develop themes initiated in the major poem of that edition but also they continue both its expansiveness and the affirmation of the epic persona. Structurally, these poems do not follow the executive--deliberative pattern of the traditional epic; for the poet orders them in such a manner that the thematic emphasis might be stressed. Yet as will be shown, they do exhibit the same epic form initiated by "Song of Myself."

The second poem in Leaves of Grass, finally titled "A Song for Occupations," opens what is, structurally, the second half of the work. This poem begins with an invitation to the reader from the American vatic poet. The vates again reasserts his method and, in so doing, makes a transition from "Song of Myself" to this second portion of Leaves of Grass:

This is unfinished business with me. . . . how is
it with you?
I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder
and wet paper between us.

I pass so poorly with paper and types. . . . I
must pass with the contact of bodies and souls.¹

¹"A Song for Occupations," ll. 3-5. p. 57.

Whitman's business, the work of the epic protagonist, Whitman implies, is incomplete: the message of the vates must be more completely developed. When the persona states that he "must pass with the contact of bodies and souls," he echoes the earlier assertion in "Song of Myself" where he denies the value of lectures and affirms that, "What I give I give out of myself."² This same idea is continued further in the second poem of Leaves of Grass. After a brief catalogue, the hero states:

All these I see. . . . but nigher and farther the
 same I see;
 None shall escape me, and none shall wish to es-
 cape me.

I bring what you much need, yet always have,
 I bring not money or amours or dress or eating.
 . . . but I bring as good;
 And send no agent or medium. . . . and offer no
 representative of value--but offer the value
 itself.³

The hero is still the prophet whose role is to reveal the true nature of being--"the value itself." This is the basic goal of the protagonist throughout the volume. But in this poem the emphasis is upon the identities of the World Soul rather than the spirit itself. The theme of the poem is spoken by the persona,

The sum of all known value and respect I add up in
 you whoever you are;

²"Song of Myself," ll. 991-992.

³"A Song for Occupations," ll. 43-47. p. 59.

.
 All doctrines, all politics and civilization
 exurge from you,
 All sculpture and monuments and anything in-
 scribed anywhere are tallied in you,
 The gist of histories and statistics as far back
 as the records reach is in you this hour--
 and myths and tales are the same;
 If you were not breathing and walking here where
 would they all be?
 The most renowned poems would be ashes. . . .
 orations and plays would be vacuums.⁴

In harmony with the scientific hypotheses of evolution current in Whitman's time, the vatic poet asserts the importance of man. He revitalizes what could easily be taken for granted--that man is the creator of the culture in which he lives. It is interesting that Whitman is here in accord with the Romantic trend of emphasizing the individual creator rather than the creation. The epic protagonist asks and answers the central thematic question of "A Song for Occupations":

Will you seek afar off? You surely come back at
 last,
 In things best known to you finding the best or as
 good as the best,

 And all else thus far known giving place to men
 and women.⁵

It is the identities, the "men and women," who are the major concern of this poem. Throughout the catalogues, the diversity of identities is explored. The perspective is

⁴Ibid., ll. 82-91. p. 60.

⁵Ibid., ll. 164-170. pp. 60-61.

geographical: space, at the middle of the nineteenth century, is explored.

The second poem of the 1855 Leaves of Grass has lateral expanse, in contrast, the third poem offers a historical vista. "To Think of Time" views the vastness of the World Soul from the perspective of time. The emphasis shifts from the identities in the former poem to the World Soul as the persona contemplates the ages. In pondering the relationship between time and the World Soul, he explains the effect of time upon an identity materialized from that same World Soul:

It is not to diffuse you that you were born of your
 mother and father--it is to identify you,
 It is not that you should be undecided, but that
 you should be decided;
 Something long preparing and formless arrived and
 formed in you,
 You are thenceforth secure, whatever comes or
 goes.⁶

The identity is merely a manifestation of the World Soul; therefore, when the outward identity passes in death, the World Soul still remains--to manifest its nature in a different form, in another identity. The theme of "To Think of Time," then, is that the World Soul is eternal. The poem builds to an affirmation of this fact which is, in effect, the conclusion of the poem.

⁶"To Think of Time," ll. 75-78. p. 68.

O my soul! if I realize you I have satisfaction,

 I swear I see now that everything has an eternal
 soul!

 I swear I think there is nothing but immortality!
 That the exquisite scheme is for it, and the
 nebulous float is for it, and the cohering is
 for it,
 And all preparation is for it. . and identity is
 for it . . and life and death are for it.⁷

The historical perspective of the poem thus reinforces this statement of faith in the World Soul: and the two poems "To Think of Time" and "A Song for Occupations" by their individual emphases fall into proper balance.

In the fourth poem, "The Sleepers," Whitman, the poet, symbolically reinforces the theme of the unity and equality existing among the individual identities in the universe or emergences of the World Soul substance. The poem opens with these lines:

I wander all night in my vision,
 . . .
 Bending with open eyes over the shut eyes of sleepers;
 Wandering and confused. . . . lost to myself. . . .
 ill-assorted. . . . contradictory,
 Pausing and gazing and bending and stopping.⁸

The sleep is the rest not only of the living but of the dead as well, and the darkness of night symbolizes the World Soul. At the conclusion of a relatively brief catalogue, the persona declares the theme of the poem:

⁷Ibid., ll. 126, 131, and 133-135. p. 69-70.

⁸"The Sleepers," ll. 1-5. p. 70.

The antipodes, and every one between this and them
 in the dark,
 I swear they are averaged now. . . . one is no better
 than the other,
 The night⁹ and sleep have likened them and restored
 them.

Similarly--

The sleepers that lived and died wait . . . the
 far advanced are to go on in their turns and
 the far behind are to go on in their turns,
 The diverse shall be no less diverse, but they
 shall flow and unite. . . . they unite now.¹⁰

Without the benefit of light, the senses, especially sight,
 are unable to distinguish the differences between people;
 this unanimity parallels the nature of the World Soul.
 Without the identities which distinguish things, one could
 not, in terms of logic, at least, be aware of the World
 Soul at all.

This emphasis upon the spiritual rather than the
 physical realm is balanced by the fifth poem, "I Sing the
 Body Electric," in which the protagonist returns once more
 to the emphasis upon meaning of identity. Thus, the human
 body is a manifestation of the World Soul; therefore, it
 is divine: "If life and the soul are sacred the human body
 is sacred."¹¹ The American vatic poet relates this truth
 to an episode of a slave at auction: "In that head the
 allbaffling brain,/In it and below it the making of the

⁹Ibid., ll. 159-161. p. 75.

¹⁰Ibid., ll. 177-178. p. 76.

¹¹"I Sing the Body Electric," l. 113. p. 82.

attributes of heroes."¹² Earlier in the poem, he had elaborated upon the human identity:

The expression of a wellmade man appears not only
 in his face,
 It is in his limbs and joints also. . . . it is
 curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,
 It is in his walk. . the carriage of his neck. .
 the flex of his waist and knees. . . . dress
 does not hide him,
 The strong sweet supple quality he has strikes
 through the cotton and flannel;
 To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem . .
 perhaps more,
 You linger to see his back and the back of his neck
 and shoulderside.¹³

Again, diversity is important: this magnificence is not limited to any single group. The protagonist states that--

The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is
 sacred. . . . it is no matter who,
 Is it a slave? Is it one of the dullfaced immigrants
 just landed on the wharf?

Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the
 well-off. . . . just as much as you,
 Each has his or her place in the procession.¹⁴

Contentment comes from the enjoyment of identities--in the appreciation that each identity is a revelation of the World Soul. The epic persona proclaims:

I have perceived that to be with those I like is
 enough,
 To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,
 To be surrounded by beautiful curious breathing
 laughing flesh is enough.¹⁵

¹²Ibid., ll. 89-90. p. 31.

¹³Ibid., ll. 7-12. pp. 76-77.

¹⁴Ibid., ll. 74-76. p. 80.

¹⁵Ibid., ll. 39-41. p. 79.

In addition to the balance which the poem as a whole offers in the sequence of individual poems, "I Sing the Body Electric" is internally symmetrical. Neither man nor woman is emphasized. For example, Section 5 describes "the female form." This is followed by a brief description of the male. Subsequently (Section 7), a male slave at auction is examined, followed (Section 8) by a brief view of a woman being auctioned. The equality is expressed not only by statement but by choice of example as well. Male and female are balanced, as well as the economic antipodes: freeman and slave.

The theme of "I Sing the Body Electric" is reflected also in the sixth poem, "Faces," which expands the diversity of identities included in the preceding poem. The World Soul abides also in those persons who are for some reason unbecoming or grotesque: "The welcome ugly face of some beautiful soul. . . . the handsome detested or despised face."¹⁶ Nor will the vates be fooled into thinking that the Soul does not reside also in the aberant identities as well as those which are normal:

Features of my equals, would you trick me with your
creased and cadaverous march?
Well then you cannot trick me.¹⁷

Whole or broken, good or bad, to the persona all men are

¹⁶"Faces," l. 7. p. 82.

¹⁷Ibid., ll. 35-36. p. 83.

his brothers:

I saw the face of the most smeared and slobbering
 idiot they had at the asylum,
 And I knew for my consolation what they knew not;
 I knew of the agents that emptied and broke my
 brother,
 The same wait to clear the fallen rubbish from
 the tenement;
 And I shall look again in a score or two of ages,
 And I shall meet the real landlord perfect and
 unharmed, every inch as good as myself.¹⁸

The protagonist, after developing and reasserting the themes of the nature of the World Soul and the nature of identities in the first six poems of the group, now turns to an emphasis upon the role of the American vatic poet in the process, adding to religious traits already established certain that are--unexpectedly--political. Thus, the second poem, "Song of the Answerer," and the tenth, "There Was a Child Went Forth," concern the spiritual nature of the American vatic poet: whereas, the seventh and eighth poems, "Europe: The 72d and 73d Years of These States" and "A Boston Ballad," respectively, reflect his political character. Except for these two poems, Whitman remained surprisingly apolitical.

"Song of the Answerer," describes the nature of the American vatic poet. Although the persona is speaking, he is describing himself--the vatic poet, the answerer:

He is the answerer,

¹⁸Ibid., ll. 41-46. p. 84.

What can be answered he answers, and what cannot be answered he shows how it cannot be answered.¹⁹

He has the ability to be understood by all men; this power is companion to his ability to identify with others--not only vicariously to become them but also to emphasize with them. This is, to a great extent, related to his choric nature. The protagonist explains:

Every existence has its idiom. . . . every thing
has an idiom and tongue;
He resolves all tongues into his own, and bestows
it upon men. . . and any man translates . . . and
any man translates himself also:
One part does not counteract another part. . .
He is the joiner. . . he sees how they join.²⁰

As may be seen, Whitman, the poet, here reiterates the nature of the epic prophet.

The eighth poem of Leaves of Grass, as already pointed out, carries a political emphasis and the setting--strangely enough for an American epic--is continental Europe. The poem, written earlier than the first edition of Leaves of Grass was revised for inclusion, for the revolutions of 1848 and 1849 had greatly impressed Whitman. In summarizing the opinions of mid-twentieth century historians concerning the mid-nineteenth century revolutions, Geoffrey Bruun has remarked:

The revolts of 1848. . . lack finality. Their brief achievements were reversed so swiftly that, in retrospect, the whole effort had assumed the aspect of a

¹⁹"Song of the Answerer," ll. 19-20. p. 86.

²⁰Ibid., ll. 29-31. p. 86.

failure, a lost campaign in a futile war. One modern commentator summed up this negative outcome by suggesting that 1848 was a turning point where history failed to turn. Proudhon, who observed the crisis at first hand, expressed the same thought, and phrased it perhaps more justly, when he said that the revolution of 1848 came before its time.²¹

Pierre Joseph Proudhon was a social theorist. His statement that the revolution was before its time coupled with the disillusion of the populace when, in a matter of months, their gains were lost--these two facts parallel the position of the poet Whitman. The popular revolution is described by the persona in "Europe: The 72d and 73d Years of These States" as follows:

Suddenly out of its stale and drowsy lair, the lair
of slaves,
Like lightning Europe le'pt forth. . . . half
startled at itself,
Its feet upon the ashes and the rags. . . . Its
hands tight to the throat of kings.²²

The persona continues:

Then in their power not for all these did the blows
strike of personal revenge . . . or the heads of
the nobles fall;
The people scorned the ferocity of kings.

But the sweetness of mercy brewed bitter destruction,
and the frightened rulers come back:
Each comes in state with his train. . . . hangman,
priest and taxgatherer, . . . soldier, lawyer,
jailer and sycophant.²³

²¹Geoffrey Bruun, Revolution and Reaction, 1848-1852 (Princeton, N. J.: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1958), p. 83.

²²"Europe: The 72d and 73d Years of These States," 11. 1-3. p. 87.

²³Ibid., 11. 11-14. p. 88.

The common people are praised for their equity, but only disdain is shown for the royalty who took advantage of this leniency and emasculated the gains of those who sought political freedom. Then, paralleling Proudhon who had stated that the revolution was before its time, the persona declares that the goals will be eventually won:

Those corpses of young men,
 Those martyrs that hang from the gibbets. . . those
 hearts pierced by the gray lead,
 Cold and motionless as they seem . . . live elsewhere
 with unslaughter'd vitality.

They live in other young men, O Kings,
 They live in brothers, again ready to defy you:
 They were purified by death . . . they were
 taught and exalted.

Not a grave of the murdered for freedom but grows
 seed for freedom. . . in its turn to bear seed,
 Which the winds carry afar and re-sow, and the
 rains and the snows nourish.²⁴

This assertion that, even though many of those who had led the revolt were killed in reprisals, liberty would prevail and, by implication, that democracy would reign is the most directly political statement of the 1855 edition.

In "A Boston Ballad," the ninth poem, the persona turns to the United States and the inequity of slavery. The occasion for the poem is briefly recounted by Gay Wilson Allen:

a fugitive slave, Anthony Burns, was seized in Boston by the United States Marshal and tried in court. Abolitionists from all New England rushed to the rescue and there was rioting and bloodshed, yet early in June the slave was returned to his owner in Virginia. . . . Troops had been called out from the near-by Marine base in Boston

²⁴Ibid., 11. 23-32. p. 88.

and the Federal Government was said to have used various pressures to secure the conviction and return of the defendant.²⁵

This satirical poem opens with the persona's ill-concealed sarcasm.

Clear the way there Jonathan!
Way for the President's marshal! Way for the
government cannon!

.
I rose this morning early to get betimes in Boston
town;
Here's a good place at the corner. . . . I must
stand and see the show.

I love to look on the stars and stripes. . . . I
hope the fife will play Yankee Doodle.²⁶

The air is that of a Fourth of July parade, but the irony builds. The persona sees the spirits of those who had fought for freedom in the United States. They literally turn in their graves at this defamation of the ideals for which they died. Then, in a final scathing outburst, the persona suggests that King George, George III, who was the British monarch during the American Revolution, should be present--even his bones could enjoy this triumph of tyranny. The willingness of the onlookers to stand by without action is castigated in the closing two lines:

Stick your hands in your pockets Jonathan. . . .
you are a made man from this day,
You are mighty cute. . . . and here is one of your
bargains.²⁷

²⁵Gay Wilson Allen, The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman (New York: New York University Press, 1955), p. 146.

²⁶"A Boston Ballad," ll. 1-6. p. 89.

²⁷Ibid., ll. 40-41. p. 90.

The "bargain," of course, is only--one man's life. To Whitman, this low ebb of American democracy was as bad as the actions of the royalty of Europe described in the previous poem. It is significant that the crowds of the former poem dared to act; yet the gathering in Boston, on the whole, did not.²⁸

Abruptly, the emphasis returns to the persona. "There Was a Child Went Forth" describes the growth of the American vatic poet. The speaker is apparently the persona --describing himself in the third person as he did in "Song of the Answerer." He begins:

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon and received
with wonder or pity or love or dread, that
object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or
a certain part of the day. . . . or for many
years or stretching cycles of years.²⁹

The vicarious emphasis is developed further by a catalogue which emphasizes the diversity of the protagonist, finally concluding with the words which end the poem:

²⁸Jonathan is the name of the folk type, the American Yankee. For a detailed examination of the type see Richard M. Dorson, "The Yankee on the Stage--A Folk Hero of American Drama," New England Quarterly, XIII, No. 3 (September, 1940), pp. 467-493. The Yankee as an essentially comic folk type was capitalized upon by Whitman in order to increase the irony of the poem. The naivete of the Yankee is, in the setting of "A Boston Ballad," far from humorous.

²⁹"There Was a Child Went Forth," ll. 1-3. p. 90.

These became part of that child who went forth
 every day, and who now goes and will always
 go forth every day,
 And these become of him or her that peruses them
 now.³⁰

Even today, he suggests, the "average unending procession" is still forming, still continuing. With this poem, Whitman had almost accomplished his purpose: his achievement is almost realized. He had developed the themes relating to the World Soul and its identities. He had reinforced his revelation of the epic protagonist, and he had applied the democratic ideal politically. Only one last point remains to be clarified.

"Who Learns My Lesson Complete" explains that the answers given by Leaves of Grass are a means rather than ends in themselves. The protagonist asks and answers the following questions:

Who learns my lesson complete?

.
 It is no lesson. . . . it lets down the bars to a
 good lesson,
 And that to another. . . . and every one to an-
 other still.³¹

By an understanding of the World Soul and its identities, the persona suggests, all men may fully appreciate the nature of being, of inanimate objects as well as of living beings and hence enjoy life's wonder. The protagonist

³⁰Ibid., ll. 31-32. p. 91.

³¹"Who Learns My Lesson Complete," ll. 1-6. p. 92.

attempts once more to share this magnificence. He is again amazed at his own being but ends the poem with the reminder that, as in the opening poem of Leaves of Grass, "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." The purpose of the eleventh poem seems chiefly to remind the audience of the lessons to be gained and, by implication, the meaning of Leaves of Grass. The complete work is to be a guide, not a mere statement of fact.

The twelfth and final poem, later entitled "Great Are the Myths" constitutes a summary assertion of the greatness of all things whether good or bad. Of the imperfect world in which he lives, the epic persona is able to say the following because he believes in the improving progression of identities:

Great is the earth, and the way it became what it is,
Do you imagine it is stopped at this? . . . and the
increase abandoned?
Understand then that it goes as far onward from this
as this is from the times when it lay in cover-
ing waters and gases.³²

This belief in perpetual evolutionary improvement, is the principle of Cosmic Evolution; and the knowledge that everything is a manifestation of the World Soul, and what allow the persona to conclude with such a strong affirmation of this democratic ethic.

Thematically, the eleven poems which complete the 1855 edition represent an extension, a reaffirmation of

³²"Great Are the Myths," ll. 30-32. p. 94.

the truths of the initial poem. The only exception is the afore-mentioned unique political emphasis represented in the contents of two entire poems and in brief passages in others. Whitman, it may be stated, inserts this new dimension of traditional politics carefully. In "Song of Myself," the political aspect of change, since it is neither emphasized nor developed, never became an integral part of the theme of that poem: though at one point the protagonist does assert:

[I] make short account of neuters and geldings,
and favor men and women fully equipped,
And beat the gong of revolt, and stop with
fugitives and them that plot and conspire.³³

But it is only when it is removed from context, as above, that the passage has any real assertive force. Later, however, the political note becomes more emphatic. In "A Song for Occupations," the protagonist refers briefly to the political realization of the democratic ethic. Concerning the United States, which in the Preface had been termed by the author as essentially the greatest poem, the protagonist asserts:

The President is up there in the White House for
you. . . . it is not you who are here for him,
The Secretaries act in their bureaus for you. . . .
not you here for them,
The Congress convenes every December for you,
Laws, courts, the forming of states, the charters
of cities, the going and coming of commerce
and mails are all for you.³⁴

³³"Song of Myself," ll. 497-498. p. 29.

³⁴"A Song of Occupations," ll. 83-86. p. 60.

In the democracy, in other words, it is the individual who is all important. This political notion is echoed in "The Sleepers" which contains a specific reference to General Washington. The persona views the commander of the American forces as he witnesses the costly retreat from Brooklyn and again as he bids farewell to his troops.³⁵ Essentially, these are not haphazard inclusions. Although brief, they are significant. This reduction of the dramatic ideal to its practical political principles included here so briefly, serves as an appropriate introduction to the two political poems, "Europe" and "A Boston Ballad." It is also noteworthy that the final poem of the 1855 edition, "Great Are the Myths" includes the following passage:

Great is the English speech. . . . What speech is
 so great as the English?
 Great is the English brood. . . . What brood has
 so vast a destiny as the English?
 It is the mother of the brood that must rule the
 earth with the new rule,
 The new rule shall rule as the soul rules, and as
 the love and justice and equality that are in
 the soul rule.³⁶

A form of this political affirmation near the conclusion of the volume seems to reinforce the sense of the importance of political action to the protagonist. For though Whitman had resigned from practical politics, he recognized,

³⁵"The Sleepers," ll. 101-109. pp. 73-74.

³⁶"Great Are the Myths," ll. 44-47. p. 94.

as seen in his epic hero, that political action is both necessary and inevitable. For only by what seems perhaps an extraneous political intrusion may this be seen to be an integral part of the Leaves' meaning as epic structure, and democratic idealism be brought to practical realization.

If it is unclear at the end of "Song of Myself," there can be no doubt by the end of the volume itself of Whitman's epic intentions. Just as earlier European epics had carried the banner of feudalism and chivalry, so Leaves of Grass proclaimed the new chant of democracy. If it be felt that Whitman overemphasizes his ideas, it should be remembered that he was not writing an epic which would exemplify an established moral system. Quite to the contrary he was writing an epic which advocated a new, more-complete application of an accepted ethic: that of democracy; but though a new gospel and a new view of man, as an identity emerged for the moment from the vastness of a World Soul; a view, for his age, as revolutionary as the shift from the Old to the New Testament.

CHAPTER IV

THE 1855 LEAVES AS EPIC FORM

The Preface of the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass implies that the work is epic in intention: a fact that is supported by the actual work itself in both subject and technical structure. Although the first edition of Whitman's volume stands alone, without need of any subsequent revisions or critical interpretations, an appraisal which Whitman offered in 1888 adds credence to the notion that Whitman himself consciously sought to write an American epic in Leaves of Grass. In "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," he wrote that the "New World receives with joy the poems of the antique, with European feudalism's rich fund of epics, plays, ballads. . . ." ¹ Concerning the effect of the latter upon his writing, he added: "If I had not stood before those poems with uncover'd head, fully aware of their colossal grandeur and beauty of form and spirit, I could not have written 'Leaves of Grass.'" ² Two paragraphs later, he actually mentions the epic form as influential, of having read early in life Homer and Ossian and the "old German Nibelungen." Whether

¹Walter Whitman, Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), p. 448.

²Ibid., pp. 448-449.

or not these were either studied or read carefully by Whitman does not minimize their importance as formative forces.

So much for his intentions. But what of the finished product?

In terms of the usual concept of an epic as a single poem, Leaves of Grass certainly does not fulfill such an imagined requirement. The first edition is clearly a series of separate poems--though integrally cohering to form a poetic whole, i.e., it is not a "poem." In his article, "Whitman's Conception of the Spiritual Democracy, 1855-1856," H. A. Myers makes the following remarks:

His system of thought . . . was as complete at the end of "Great are the Myths" as was Milton's at the completion of Paradise Regained; and the unity of thought manifest in the ten significant poems of 1855, added to their original lack of titles, suggests that they might have been woven into one long epic, if Whitman had not been converted to Poe's theory that long poems are not suited to modern needs.³

For Poe, the genre itself is faulty:

the ultimate, aggregate, or absolute effect of even the best epic under the sun, is a nullity. . . . The modern epic is, of the suppositions ancient model, but an inconsiderate and blindfold imitation. But the day of these artistic anomalies is over. If, at any time, any very long poem were popular in reality, which I doubt, it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again.⁴

³Henry Alonzo Myers, "Whitman's Conception of the Spiritual Democracy, 1855-56," American Literature, Number 6 (November, 1934), p. 251.

⁴Poe, Poe, Complete Poems and Stories, II, p. 1022.

Whitman's response to Poe's general thesis regarding the long poem is reflected in the following statement:

. . . I was repaid in Poe's prose by the idea that (at any rate for our occasions, our day) there can be no such thing as a long poem. The same thought had been haunting my mind before, but Poe's argument, though short, work'd the sum and proved it to me.⁵

This appraisal some thirty-two years after the emergence of Leaves of Grass sheds light on Whitman's effort to adapt the epic genre to a modern setting. If one wishes to write an epic, but finds that the long sustained poem associated with the epic is no longer feasible, expand the genre beyond the limitations of a single poem. One measure of the worth of Whitman's revision of the classical epic form is that the innovation represented by the 1855 edition achieved sufficient freshness to modernize the genre. Whitman handles the fact that the epic was traditionally narrative in form in a similar fashion. The 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass is a lyric epic; one comprised almost entirely of lyric components, the order of which is based primarily upon thematic sequence. Certainly the work is not in any sense chronological, though there is present a definite progressive rhetorical ordering, as has already been documented in the preceding discussion: i.e., in the balanced sequence of executive, deliberative, and declarative

⁵Miller, p. 450.

sections. This truth holds for both the single poem which was later entitled "Song of Myself" and the entire poetic unit, Leaves of Grass. Narrative elements, when they do appear, are perhaps most obvious in individual scenes such as the account of the Bonhomme Richard in "Song of Myself." Panoramic scenes as conveyed in Whitman's famous catalogues likewise contain narrative elements: but, again, it is either the rhetorical order or the thematic order that is dominant.

It may be significant to the evaluation of Whitman's adaptation of the genre to mention two works by American authors which seem to have followed in the generic footsteps of Leaves of Grass. Both The Cantos of Ezra Pound and Paterson by William Carlos Williams have been called epic: the former being composed of a series of individual cantos which occur in various historical settings, but which have a unity provided by theme and a focal reference to the Odyssean travels of Homer's second epic; the latter being primarily a series of connected lyrics unified by their recounting of the life of the persona, Paterson, who is both a city and a man. Depending upon the epic nature and success of these--and, quite possibly other--poems, Whitman may have created in addition to a single exceptional epic aberration, a viable literary genre for American writing adapted particularly to the American setting.

As already demonstrated, Leaves of Grass generally has, as its centers, the four fundamental foci of the epic, and, by its exhibition of these norms, is securely held within the tradition of the genre. Being truly a product of the epic imagination, the volume is unbounded by space or by time. Its general impression is that of heroic vitality.

In its over-all structure, the 1855 Leaves falls into two mutually supportive halves: the first half presenting the epic hero in the panoply of his person and role, the second concentrating on his pivotal doctrines. Structural balance and symmetry in the first half are provided by the basic arrangement of the four "lays." Thus, the first and third sections of "Song of Myself" are organized in the traditional epic fashion, with deliberative episodes offsetting executive scenes. The second and fourth chants, however, are declarative--in effect providing a symmetrical balance between themselves and the alternate deliberative and executive groupings. In contrast the second half of the 1855 edition is thematically balanced. Five poems--"A Song for Occupations," "To Think of Time," "The Sleepers," "I Sing the Body Electric," and "Faces"--develop the themes concerning the explication of the nature of the World Soul and its identities. The next group of poems--"Song of the Answerer," "Europe," "A Boston Ballad," and "There Was a Child Went Forth"--emphasize the nature

of the American vatic poet and the value of political action. The final two poems, "Who Learns My Lesson Complete" and "Great Are the Myths," respectively clarify the message of the vates and serve as a final affirmation of the democratic ethic underlying the protagonist's total program.

The expansive freedom and vitality of Leaves of Grass are also controlled by the persona who is present in every poem unit. In many respects the latter is heroic in the sense of the traditional epic hero; yet at the same time curiously not. Thus, Whitman's epic hero is a single personage--the American vatic poet--but, as he vicariously participates in the lives and actions of nineteenth-century America, he is a conglomerate individual in the World Soul. Moreover, the epic persona of Leaves of Grass differs from his ancient epic predecessor in his failure to effect forceful political change; though not to an absolute degree, since, as a democratic prophet, he is the initiator of reform. Finally, the epic hero introduced in "Song of Myself" is greater than human, but he is not beyond humanity. He acts in individual episodes but asserts himself primarily as the vates of the New World. This choric nature of the persona may be seen in both the setting of the twelve poems, the American national scene, and in the particular and distinctive character of the United States as it existed in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Above all, as epic, Leaves of Grass conveys the spirit of the American experiment in democracy and asserts the democratic ethic; just as earlier epics, ancient or classical, had evoked the spirit and proclaimed the standards of the ancient or the feudal worlds. On this point, reference to "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" is again valuable:

As America fully and fairly construed is the legitimate result and evolutionary outcome of the past, so I would dare to claim for my verse. Without stopping to qualify the averment, the Old World has had the poems of myths, fictions, feudalism, conquest, caste, dynastic wars, and splendid exceptional characters and affairs, which have been great; but the New World needs the poems of realities and science and of the democratic average and basic equality, which shall be greater.⁶

America, full of promise, had become, finally, the proper setting, and the proper subject for an epic. Where Conquest of Cannan, The Columbiad, and other similarly constructed poems had failed to adapt the epic genre to this continent, Walt Whitman, in the first edition of Leaves of Grass, succeeded.

That Whitman was consciously attempting to write an epic in the 1855 Leaves is clear. Although his conception of the epic lay only within the terms of the traditional and conventional meaning of the genre, his genius in effect intuited the essence of the form: anticipating in this

⁶Ibid., p. 449.

respect, the theories of modern critics concerning the nature of epic writing. From this point of view, he created a small volume of twelve poems which, essentially, embody the epic distillate. Although it was virtually unrecognized by the American public, the 1855 Leaves of Grass was the first volume in America successfully to adopt the heroic legacy of the epic form to the native setting of the country: it is, indeed, an American epic.

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