

COMMENT

In 1855, two daring books came out in America. One was the work of that very visible and scholarly poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who, in his unassuming way, was to the United States what Tennyson was to England; the other, a slim volume, was written by one Whitman, a Brooklyn journalist. Both works were American experiments. Longfellow used the sing-song cadences of the Finnish *The Kalevala* for his Red Indian tale; Whitman's starting point was the book of Psalms. *The Song of Hiawatha*, now left to children and to the historians of literature, was widely read; Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote to a friend: "How I hate wishy washy, of course without reading it." *Leaves of Grass* found at least one grateful reader, Emerson, who had also foreseen it and who had called Whitman his benefactor.

Leaves of Grass cannot be thought away. Such major poets as Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, and Pablo Neruda were led to their quite different achievements by that strange book. Sandburg could handle the vernacular far more deftly than Whitman; in the meantime *Huckleberry Finn* had been written. Whitman went from the common speech of the streets to crude purple patches; now and then he was apt to go from the ridiculous to the sublime.

*I love you, I depart from the material,
I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead.**

All over the world, *Leaves of Grass* has been imitated and echoed, but the theory behind it has not, I think, been fully understood.

The essential clue is to be found in the second inscription, "As I Ponder'd in Silence." A phantom, "Terrible in beauty, age, and power," rises before the poet and tells him that there is but one theme for poetry: war. The poet answers that he also sings war, "*a longer and a greater one than any*," and that he also promotes brave soldiers. The phantom, of course, stands for epic poetry; Whitman is telling us that the whole book should be read as a single epic: The epic of democracy, obviously. We tend to read it as a series of individual poems; the fact is that the writer went on enlarging it, from edition to edition under the same all-inclusive title.

Whitman read the epics of the past with due reverence. In their pages the hero is a giant who looms and towers over the lesser characters of the fables. In the case of an epic of democracy, this scheme would never do. Whitman stood in no need of a single outstanding hero; he sought a mob of heroes. We may be thankful for the fact that he was no novelist; had he been one, he would have attempted populist and extensive books, packed full of people, after the manner of Dickens or Balzac. He did far better. Instead of mere multitudes, he gave us an undying myth: Walt Whitman.

*Editor's note: Mr. Borges is using an edition other than the 1891-92 "death-bed" edition of *Leaves of Grass* published by David McKay in Philadelphia, which is now considered to be the "standard" edition.

Let us look at a section of a poem:

*Starting from fish-shaped Paumanok, where I was born,
Well-begotten, and raised by a perfect mother;
After roaming many lands—lover of populous pavements;
Dweller in Manhatta, my city—or on southern savannas;
Or a soldier camp'd, or carrying my knapsack and gun—or
a miner in California;
Or rude in my home in Dakota's woods, my diet meat, my
drink from the spring;
Or withdrawn to muse and meditate in some deep recess,
Far from the clank of crowds, intervals passing, rapt and
happy;
Aware of the fresh free giver, the flowing Missouri—aware
of mighty Niagara;
Aware of the buffalo herds, grazing the plains—the birsute
and strong-breasted bull;
Of earth, rocks, Fifth-month flowers, experiences—stars,
rain, snow, my amaze;
Having studied the mocking-bird's tones, and the moun-
tain-hawk's;
And heard at dusk the unrival'd one, the hermit thrush
from the swamp-cedars,
Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World.*

In the foregoing lines fact and fancy are deliberately interwoven. Whitman roams in imagination over the whole vast continent. Actually, he had no experience of the southern savannas, nor of searching for gold in California, nor of a soldier's life, or of the hermit-thrush in the swamp-cedars, nor of the bison and the flowing Missouri. He did not strike up for a New World while he was in the West, but while residing in some tall house in Manhattan. In this fine poem we find both the real Whitman and the magnification of Whitman. The poet needed more than that. In a now-irrecoverable moment, now lost forever, a third person was given to him, a third person demanded by the epic he was about to write. That person is the reader. You, me, and all the





generations to come.

Walt Whitman is a trinity of the man who was born on Long Island in 1819 and died in 1892 in New Jersey, of his image born in all places and immortal, and of the reader who asks him: *What do you see Walt Whitman?* and who is thus also a part of the poem.

Walt Whitman's voice has rung throughout the planet. Every other poet has echoed it, with temporal or local variations. The work has been taken as a model; nobody has attempted his method. For all we know, he was the one man who could do it. Only he could have written:

*These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands—they
are not original with me.*

Or

I am the man, I suffered, I was there.

Darling Artlessness

Italo Calvino: *Marcovaldo or the Seasons in the City*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; San Diego.

Judging by this slim volume, Italo Calvino, the world famous, premier Italian writer ("one of Italy's greatest" says the PR bio), is warm, simple, likable, sweet, both in substance and style. *Marcovaldo* consists of loosely conceived and bound tales that compose themselves into a silhouette of a Franciscan proleta-

rian who is sweet, simple, warm, likable, and full of love for nature. He inhabits his not-too-clement, modern, Italian, urban landscape, and he is stubbornly emanating sweetness, simplicity, warmth, and some capacity for sensing what's better in the universe. That's all. Not long ago, we could read in the *New York Times* that Mr. Calvino "belongs to the intellectual school of . . . Kafka, Nabokov and Borges." This linear equation seems to us to be as deft and accurate as one drawn between an abacus and an IBM computer. □

On the event of the awarding of The Ingersoll Prizes, the following message was received from Dr. William J. Bennett, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities:

The Ingersoll Foundation is to be congratulated on the establishment of The Ingersoll Prizes. In this time, when the clamor of current issues preempts so much public attention, your dramatic focus upon the finest works of literature and scholarship is greatly needed and profoundly welcomed.

Government support of culture is a risky business; in our tenure we have noted that over and over again. It is upon the activity of private citizens and private institutions that truly free inquiry, scholarship, and culture depends.

The intelligent event you celebrate tonight is symbolic of the heart of support for culture in a nation of free people. My very best wishes to you, and my gratitude to you for this welcome reminder to a sometimes myopic Washington that there is a world elsewhere, and that it is good. □

Or

This is the meal equally set—this is the meat for natural hunger.

Or

*After the child is born of woman, man is born of woman;
this is the bath of birth and the outlet again.*

Art happens, said Whistler; *die Rose ist ohne Warum*, the rose has no why, wrote Angelus Silesius. To explain beauty is to explain it away. I have merely tried to explain the theory behind Whitman's splendid achievement.

A man who goes from *Leaves of Grass* to a biography of the writer inevitably feels that he is being let down. The reason is obvious. The hero of the first is the divine vagabond Walt Whitman; the hero of the second is the poor man of genius who wrought the myth. In 1882, Robert Louis Stevenson penned rather grudgingly these words: "The whole of Whitman's work is deliberate and preconceived."

When a literary experiment is a failure, as in the case of *Finnegans Wake*, we worship it and we take good care not to read it; when it succeeds, as in the cases of the Lewis Carroll books and *Leaves of Grass*, we think of it as easy and inevitable.

—Jorge Luis Borges

Jorge Luis Borges is an Argentinian writer, and the first laureate of the T. S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing of The Ingersoll Prizes.

'Dear Diary . . .'

The Illustrated Pepys: Extracts from the Diary; Edited by Robert Latham; University of California Press; Berkeley.

by Ronald Berman

Samuel Pepys, Clerk of the Acts to the Navy Board, began a diary on the first of January 1660 and continued it until the 31st of May 1669. The original manuscript was, so far as we know, hardly noticed for the next 150 years. In six bound volumes it remained in the Pepys Library of Magdalene College, Cambridge. It had few readers, even among the learned, because the text was for the most part written in Shelton shorthand, a system which had been in use in England since 1626.

In the 19th century, after transcription of the diary began, Pepys became the interest both of scholars and of the public. Over a 60-year period, from 1825 on, editions of the diary began to appear. But there was one thing common to all of them: they were intentionally incomplete. Pepys was ruthlessly honest and very descriptive about his sex life, and this was simply too difficult for the 19th century to accept. So, until 1970, when the whole text was reproduced by the University of California edition of the diary, any copy of it had strategic omissions.

Most of Pepys's text is in Shelton shorthand; some of it is in longhand; a small but important part of it is in a strange mixture of Spanish, French, and English that Pepys used to describe certain moments—usually those of sexual activity. This private language may not have been intended so much to elude detection as to distance Pepys himself from embarrassing moments. One of the reasons why the University of California "translation" of the diary is important is that the

private language is for the first time included. The Wheatley edition of 1893-99, previously the standard edition, will have the following entry for 25 October 1668:

At night W. Batelier comes and sups with us; and after supper, to have my head combed by Deb, which occasioned the greatest sorrow to me that ever I knew in this world; for my wife, coming up suddenly, did find me embracing the girl. . . . I was at a wonderful loss upon it, and the girl also.

Pepys was being deloused, a more-or-less routine 17th-century practice, and Deb was his wife's pretty servant, with whom he was rapidly falling in love. But the new version of the episode will replace ellipsis with the line "con my hand sub su coats; and ended, I was with my main in her cunny."

When sex is involved Pepys is both open and secretive. He had what I suppose can best be called a mistress of convenience, a Mrs. Bagwell, whose husband was dependent upon Pepys for promotion and who seemed to acquiesce nicely in the arrangement. But even in discussing the routine in this evidently conscious exchange Pepys slips into his patois: "And did senza alguna difficulty monter los degres and lie, comme jo desired it, upon lo lectum; and there I did la cosa con much voluptas."

Although the *Diary* has the deserved reputation of being one of the world's

greatest autobiographical works, it covers a period of only nine years. I think that Boswell is more interesting, but Pepys is more informative. The reason that the *Diary* has fascinated readers since the 19th century even with strategic editorial censorship is that it tells us more about life in general than any other book. And I don't mean by this that it covers business, law, the arts, etc. Nor even that it matters because of the first-hand descriptions of the plague and the Great Fire of London. The reason the *Diary* is important is that it is a literary text.

The *Diary* is not only a journal of events but a series of reflections on them. Thus it is a story of consciousness. It is deeply reflective, concerned with dreams, daydreams, and states of mind. It is about the dissimulation necessarily involved in modern relationships between the self and the world. It is often about Pepys's weaknesses—he was hasty, angry, very stingy, and quintessentially lustful—and even more often about his reaction to them. There was a certain amount of Puritan to Pepys, so that the record of his life is a kind of *Pilgrim's Progress* of body and mind. Richard Ollard's excellent biography, *Pepys*, examines the whole Bagwell relationship, which reveals so much about Pepys's willingness to use his office for sexual favors, his meanness, and his opportunistic use of place and circumstance:

Like the Impressionists he disdains the neutral tints. The actor-narrator provides insights of his own that could support a Marxist indictment of bourgeois exploitation, a Christian exposition of sin, and the more cynical view that morality consists in what one can get away with. . . . Pepys sometimes desires Mrs. Bagwell, sometimes pities her, sometimes despises her. There is no suggestion of love or tenderness. . . . higher feelings were inspired by women of higher class. Lady



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