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Paul R. Cappucci  
*Georgian Court College*

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## The "Wash'd-up Drift" of Poetic Ideals: Disunion as Poetic Failure in Walt Whitman's "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life"

Paul R. Cappucci

*Paul Cappucci is Assistant Professor of English at Georgian Court College and author of William Carlos Williams' Poetic Response to the 1913 Paterson Silk Strike (2003).*

In the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman fashioned a poetic persona that boldly claimed to be a national unifying force for the United States. As an American poet with a distinctive "barbaric yawp" ("Song of Myself" 1333), Whitman aspired to harmonize the many differences inherent in his country — "I am large, I contain multitudes" (1326). He was fully committed to playing a national role. "*Union was the keel,*" as Daniel Aaron suggests, "that kept his religion, philosophy, and aesthetic from foundering . . ." (59). Yet Whitman's commitment to this national role made him vulnerable to the nation's ever-present sectional divisions. As he realized towards the close of the decade, the troubles associated with these sectional divisions were beyond his poetic powers. The poem "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" expresses Whitman's sense of failing and represents a desperate attempt on his part to reconfigure his poetic role in a country headed for disunion.

In the Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman patriotically boasts, "the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (711). Whitman's assertion of these "united" states as a singular poem epitomizes his belief in poetry's capacity to be a national unifying power. He subsequently claims that the poet's "spirit responds to his country's spirit . . . He spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between them" (713). This expansive image of a poet embodies Whit-

man's conception of his national responsibility. The poet reflects and responds to the country's spirit. Such important powers, according to Whitman, make the poet's role one of the most influential in the nation. In his notebook he remarks, "You must become a force in the State — and a real and great force — just as real and great as the president and congress — greater than they" (qtd. Reynolds 381). Such a statement reveals the pressure Whitman placed upon himself to be not only a respected poet, but also a national unifying force.

"Song of Myself" is the manifestation of the idealized poetic self that Whitman introduced in his Preface. Paul Zweig considers it "probably the finest enactment in all literature of the adventure of self making" (18). The poem projects a self that celebrates and exalts its unifying power. He calls upon his readers to share his vision: "Do you see O my brothers and sisters? / It is not chaos or death — it is form, union, plan — it is eternal / life — it is Happiness" (1317-1318). This stress on form and happiness reveals Whitman's own need for order and harmony. In a country consisting of so many differences and divisions, he becomes a "Southerner soon as a Northerner . . . A Kentuckian . . . a Louisianian or Georgian, . . . a Hoosier, Badger, Buckeye; . . . At home on the hills of Vermont . . . or the Texan ranch" (334-341). By symbolically identifying himself with all of these different sections of the United States, Whitman constructs a national persona that embodies order and wholeness. This self-construction is typical of what Zweig describes as Whitman's "poetic labor of union . . . [his attempt] to overcome the ugliness of sectional conflict" (77). This "poetic labor of union" is a persistent theme throughout Whitman's early poetry.

Yet throughout this period the sectional tension had been mounting. On October 16th, John Brown raided the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia in an attempt to invade the South and precipitate the freeing of slaves. By December 2nd of 1859, Brown had been tried and executed. Although Brown's trial was over quickly, James McPherson remarks, "the repercussions resounded for years" (206). For many Americans, it became obvious that the country was heading toward war and disunion. The *Richmond Enquirer* and *Richmond Whig* expressed such a sentiment:

The Harper's Ferry invasion has advanced the cause of disunion more than any event that has happened since the formation of the government . . . Thousands of men . . . who, a month ago, scoffed at the idea of a dissolution of the Union . . . now hold the opinion that its days are numbered.

(qtd. McPherson 211)

The general Northern and Southern responses to Brown's act and execution were distinctly different: the North made him into a martyr, whereas the South saw him as the manifestation of its worst fears. Because Whitman's idealized poetic self was both sensitive to national

spirit and devoted to the Union, the events of 1859 — especially Brown's raid and execution — contributed to the feelings of failure and fragmentation that he expresses in "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life."

Whitman initially appeared indifferent to Brown's execution. He told Horace Traubel that Brown's actions failed to "spoil" his "supper." "I see martyrdoms wherever I go," he said. "Why should I go off emotionally half-cocked only about the ostentatious cases?" (qtd. Kaplan 256). Yet Whitman couldn't help but to be drawn into the pervasive repercussions of Brown's actions. By April 4, 1860, while overseeing the latest printing of *Leaves of Grass* in Boston, Whitman attended the trial of Franklin B. Sanborn, one of the "secret six" who supported Brown's efforts (Reynolds 384). His new publishers, Thayer and Eldridge, were also in attendance. (Their recent publication of Brown's biography had been a major success.) Whitman even went on to write a poem directly referencing Brown's execution — "Year of Meteors (1859-60)." The poem's title evokes a meteor shower that occurred in November 1859, which Whitman describes as a "huge meteor-procession dazzling and clear shooting / over our head" (18). The meteoric imagery, though, has more than factual importance. To people living in 1859, such an unusual celestial occurrence seemed to hold some deeper meaning. "Superstitious people have ever seen in celestial phenomena, eclipses, comets, shooting stars, &c.," a *New York Times* reporter observes, "omens dire, and tribulations *in futuro*. What of Harper's Ferry, and a general rise of the Negroes? Is a dissolution of the Union imminent, or are we only threatened with an unusually cold Winter and a rise in the price of coals?" ("A Startling Meteoric Display" 5). As the reporter's musing suggests, it was not far off to associate this phenomena with the current events that seemed to be consuming the Union. Unlike the speculative reporter who leaves his questions unanswered, Whitman links the appearance of these meteors with Brown and Harper's Ferry — it is an omen of things to come.

In "Year of Meteors," Whitman tries to frame a song about the tumultuous year which concluded with Abraham Lincoln's election as President. However, the major figure appearing in the poem is Brown. The speaker seeks to record Brown's final walk to death: "I would sing how an old man, tall, with white hair, mounted the / scaffold in Virginia" (4). Like he does in so many other poems, Whitman transcends space and time. He places himself at the scene of Brown's "martyrdom":

(I was at hand, silent I stood with teeth shut close, I watch'd,  
I stood very near you old man when cool and indifferent, but  
trembling with age and your unheal'd wounds you  
mounted the scaffold;)

(5-6)

The speaker does not speak or sing at this solemn moment. He seems powerless to do anything, and his songs seem useless. All he can do is to stand by as a silent spectator to Brown's ascension to death. The



self-doubt coincided in Whitman with the period when America was on the verge of Civil War" (102). The poem has an indisputable personal meaning for Whitman (and many readers) — the subsequent exploration of its socio-historical context is not intended to dismiss, diminish, or trivialize such interpretations. Rather the intention here is to suggest that in this poem, Whitman, the poet who claimed to "advance from the people in their own spirit" ("Starting from Paumanok" 94), represents the sense of disillusionment and fragmentation consuming the entire nation.

The placement of the speaker on the shores of Paumanok in the poem's first section echoes Whitman's starting point in "Starting from Paumanok." That earlier self, though born on the island, expands over the continent; the self Whitman portrays in "As I Ebb'd . . ." remains exclusively upon the local shore. Whitman's concerted effort to keep the speaker of this poem grounded reveals his need to confront his immediate reality. He presents a grounded self, grappling with the origin of his identity. Whitman's presentation of this speaker's state of mind is inextricably intertwined with the surroundings. This is evident when he states:

I musing late in the autumn day, gazing off southward,  
Held by this electric self out of the pride of which I utter  
    poems,  
Was seiz'd by the spirit that trails in the lines underfoot. . . .

(6-8)

These lines distinctly suggest an outside presence contributing to the speaker's melancholic feeling. Although it may be asking too much to link the speaker's autumn musing with a specific 1859 autumn event like Brown's Harper's Ferry Raid, Whitman does direct his gaze toward the South, which links personal anxiety with regional turmoil. As David Reynolds notes, he is distinctly "like Whitman in the late fifties, a troubled Northerner with his eyes turned sadly South" (380). In the next line, Whitman describes this speaker as initially possessed by the egoism found in the electric, poetic self of 1855. Yet the third line indicates a significant change. The poetic self Whitman identified with his idealized United States is now seized by the spirit emanating from the "sediment" directly underfoot. This "sediment," a unique composition of land and sea, symbolizes the fragmented waste produced by the clash of the real and the ideal in Whitman's own life. It captivates the troubled speaker's attention:

Fascinated, my eyes reverting from the south, dropt, to follow  
    those slender windrows,  
Chaff, straw, splinters of wood, weeds, and the sea gluten,  
Scum, scales from shining rocks, leaves of salt lettuce, left by the  
tide, . . .

(10-12)

Significantly, these inglorious, fragmentary remnants replace the speaker's southward gaze. Instead of expansive thoughts filled with harmony and union, the speaker turns his attention to the fragments washed on the shore of this "fish-shaped island." As a consequence of this fragmentary vision, the speaker also experiences a division. By the close of section one, he walks alongside "that electric self seeking types" (17). On a shoreline separating two realms, this self-division reflects a fragmentation of the real self and the ideal self of 1855.

The poem's second section opens with the exposed and uncertain real self experiencing oppressive pressure. After the division from his electric self, the speaker admits, "I know not" (18). The powers of the breezes and ocean, once helpmates to mystical transcendence, now seem to set upon him with all their brute force. In the midst of his assault on the shore, he fittingly hears a dirge composed of "wreck'd" voices. These voices provide a background chorus to his feelings of uncertainty and fragmentation; he is not alone. As Betsy Erkkila contends, the voices "broaden the poem's personal lament into a national elegy, a dirge for the shipwrecked selves of a collapsing culture and a dying world" (164). All of the pressures of these sounds result in one of Whitman's frankest poetic confessions — "I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd-up-drift" (22). This identification with the washed up debris, the mangled remnants of his desire to construct an ideal union in spite of real sectional divisions, suggests Whitman's realization that his poetry has failed in its purpose of providing national unity. With the impending disunion of the country, Whitman's role as America's bard dissolves. Consequently, the brazen claims made by the 1855 self now torture him. As this grounded self candidly admits,

O baffled, balk'd, bent to the very earth,  
 Oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,  
 Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon  
 me I have not once had the least idea who or what I am.  
 (25-27)

As the alliteration in the first line suggests, the speaker has been badly beaten into his current state of disillusionment and uncertainty. The all-knowing self-celebrator of 1855 has been shattered by the overwhelming power of sociopolitical forces. The bravado of that earlier self is nowhere to be found. The speaker now understands that the "real Me" stands beyond his poetically fashioned self. This "real Me" stands far ahead "mocking" and "laughing" at the speaker's poetic failings. It then equates this shift with the shore scene, "Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath" (31). This correlation between the songs and shifting sands poignantly identifies the unsound foundation of the speaker's poetic persona. This mocking exposure forces the speaker to admit, "I perceive I have not really understood any thing" (32). The section concludes with the beaten poet receiving stinging

rebukes from Nature, which earlier had offered him feelings of transcendence and empowerment.

In section three the speaker moves beyond an identification and awareness of his failings and symbolically embraces them. This embrace of Paumanok's "friable shore" has powerful paternal associations. In a striking conflation of Paumanok and father, the speaker admits, "What is yours is mine my father" (40). He then takes the action of a desperate, attention-seeking child:

I throw myself upon your breast my father,  
I cling to you so that you cannot unloose me,  
I hold you so firm till you answer me something.

(45-47)

Zweig points to this section as the culmination of Whitman's unresolved personal issues concerning his father. According to Zweig, Whitman thought father and failure to be synonymous; through this embrace Whitman "reaches out in a brotherhood of failure" to his father (309).

Zweig's contention, especially in consideration of the desperate passion embodied in this scene, is persuasive. This powerful psychological reading, however, should not restrict the possibility that for Whitman the use of father may also involve other connotations. As Hutchinson suggests, "if we can catch the conflation of 'father' with 'founding father' . . . the poem gains its relationship to the historical 'ground' of the 1860 volume" (104). One might even go a step further to consider that Whitman's address of Paumanok as father also means father-land (Erkkila 167). In this context, the speaker's acceptance of his father's failings suggests his acceptance of his country's failings to maintain an ideal democratic union. Interestingly, in the section's final image, the speaker attempts to make intimate contact with this father figure.

Kiss me my father,  
Touch me with your lips as I touch those I love,  
Breathe to me while I hold you close the secret  
of the murmuring I envy.

(48-50)

This plea for a kiss reveals his desire to possess a loving union with this father despite the sense of failure surrounding him. It is through such an intimate connection that the narrator attempts to find a resuscitative breath, a breath that holds, for the poet and the nation, the secret of surviving beyond failure and disunion. This attempted kiss, which is literally enacted upon Paumanok's indifferent shores, reveals the speaker's desperation to find some form of connection and unity in this time of sectional division.

The final section of the poem opens with a reserved assertion — "(the flow will return)" (51). This assertion reveals the speaker's belief in the return of a sea/land union that will engulf the shoreline frag-



ments. As evident by his use of parentheses enclosing the statement, Whitman's assertion is not boastful or jubilant; it is merely an understanding of perpetual processes. Consequently, he pleads with an indifferent maternal sea, the originating realm of ideals like "union," to treat him gently and to continue its lament for the fragments it has left on the shore. After failing to receive any sign of parental nurturing from land or sea, the poet attempts to pull together his fragmented reality:

I mean tenderly by you and all,  
I gather for myself and for this phantom looking down where  
we lead, and following me and mine.  
Me and mine, loose windrows, little corpses, . . .

(55-57)

He then goes on to catalogue this deadened and fragmented self in terms of sea and land — froth, bubbles, sand, and tufts of straw. All of these fragments suggest the different, contradicting remains of the poet. By the poem's conclusion, the fragmented poet, who is still seeking some form of union, uses the 1855 technique of identification to transcend his sense of isolation. He becomes the slender windrows at his reader's feet and calls out through time, "You up there walking or sitting, / Whoever you are, we too lie in drifts at your feet" (70-71). In this act, he fully acknowledges and accepts his failure and fragmentation. Although this is a humbling experience for the poet, it enables him to keep going and to reach out beyond the ebb of this moment. Ultimately, this cycle of failure, survival, and reformation is crucial for Whitman's nationalistic self-conception. From the depths of his own "loose windrows, little corpses," he later reemerges in *Drum-Taps* as the nation's "Wound-Dresser." In his famous elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," the distraught speaker envisions "battle-corpses, myriads of them" and translates their meaning to generations of future readers — "they were not as was thought" (177; 180). Thus, Whitman's "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life" initiates a recurring re-visioning of his poetic role amid an ever-shifting national narrative.

In the early 1850s Whitman had planned on being America's bard, a spokesman of the nation's spirit weaving poetic unity and harmony throughout the inherent differences of the country. By the conclusion of the decade, Whitman somberly realizes that his poetry cannot unify his nation. His failure to fulfill his grandiose claims causes his 1855 ideal poetic self to collapse in upon itself at the feet of the "real Me." In many ways, this collapse reveals the politically conscious Whitman's resignation to his inability to affect the sectional tensions of his day. He admits failure and accepts his place as a fragmented self in a fragmented reality. But in the end, always conscious of future generations, he accepts a new role. He becomes the wash'd up drift, a marker of failure, yet also a believer that sooner or later the flow will return.

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