

BEYOND THE MYTH OF NARCISSUS: THE ROLE OF THE READER IN WALT WHITMAN'S «SONG OF MYSELF»

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Whitman studies have been traditionally focused on either biographical or textual matters. The reader has been systematically neglected in the literary analysis. That is why critics have often conceived «Song of Myself» as a narcissistic, solipsistic, and even onanistic work of art. Few have understood the need for Whitman's poem to be contemplated from a wider perspective. Reader oriented theories offer new insights into the subject, placing the reader in a communicative situation with the text. This paper aims to analyze the role of the reader in Whitman's poem as it is explicitly explained within the text itself. «Song of Myself» is a notable example of metapoetry in which the author reflects upon the literary work of art and its relationship with its audience. After a brief commentary of the previous articles on the subject. I will concentrate on the study of the text- reader interaction in the light of W. Iser's phenomenological approach.

The dialogic quality of Whitman's poetry is stated by J. Mason, who interprets «Song of Myself» as «a dialogue between speaker and reader which leads to vitalization and at last to comradeship»¹. This movement of the narrative voice towards explicit intimacy with the reader is also the focus of G. V. Trail's analysis, which comes to the suggestive conclusion that «Whitman's explanation of himself is, in addition, an explanation of his audience»². Similarly, D.D. Kummings studies the shift in the poet's voice between the 1855 and the 1891-1892 editions of «Song of Myself». This change in emphasis is viewed as a consequence of «Whitman's regard for a more specific, more particular audience»³.

¹ John B. Mason, «Questions and Answers in Whitman's 'Confab,'» *American Literature* 51 (1980): 499.

² George Y. Trail, «'Song of Myself': Events in the Microstructure», *Walt Whitman Review* 25.3 (1979): 112.

³ Donald D. Kummings, «Whitman's Voice in 'Song of Myself': From Private to Public», *Walt Whitman Review* 17 (1971): 11.

One of the most interesting commentaries on the poem comes from J.J. Benevento. In his comparative approach to Whitman's poetry and Borges's fiction, he stresses their effort «to make the reader a character and an active participant in the work of art»⁴. He also points out the self reflective nature of their literary production, referring to «Song of Myself» as a poem «about how to read the poem»⁵.

This increasing interest in the role of the reader may be considered the result of the influence of Reader-Response Criticism during the last ten years: however, very few scholars seem to draw directly on a particular theory. Their approaches tend to stem from subjective readings of Whitman's texts rather than from a rigorous application of these methodologies.

In his classic piece *The Act of Reading*, W. Iser proposes a new approach to literary analysis. From his point of view, the meaning of the work cannot be considered as inherent to the work itself, but rather the result of the actualizing activity of the reader. This activity is conditioned by the structure of the text, which functions as a framework for the reader's search for intention. «Song of Myself» bears a striking similarity to Iser's phenomenology. In the following lines I will explain in detail this hypothesis, using Whitman's poem to exemplify some of the most important concepts developed by Iser. In order to do so, I will follow the logical sequence of the poem, as well as Iser's pattern of analysis as stated in *The Act of Reading: the Structure of the Text, Phenomenology of Reading, and Text-Reader Interaction*⁶.

The very first stanza of «Song of Myself» contains in itself the central message of the poem, the identification between the poet's voice and the reader:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (25)⁷

As G.V. Trail points out, throughout the poem the «I- you» relationship describes a movement from an initial asymmetry, represented by the imperative tone of the second line («what I assume you shall assume»), to the final equality suggested by the third line («For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you»)⁸. This progression is similarly stressed by the first («I») and the last word of the stanza («you»), as well as by the switch in syntactic function of the personal pronouns: the first and second person pronouns («I» and «you») alternate as subject and object of the sentences. The outcome is one of the shortest and most effective allegories of reading ever written. The rest of the poem becomes the logical de-

⁴ Joseph J. Benevento, «What Borges Learned from Whitman: The Open Road and Its Forking Paths», *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 2.4 (1985): 22.

⁵ Benevento 26.

⁶ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁷ All Whitman quotations are taken from *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, Edited by James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959).

⁸ Trail, 107.

velopment of these three stages: the assertion of the poet's self as expressed in the text, the series of commands and cues offered in the text to allow and provoke the reader response, and the final merging of «the self» and «the other» as a consequence of the text-reader interaction.

The promise of the ultimate communion with the poet's self is repeatedly and more explicitly stated in the second section. After mocking the reader's ability to produce meaning on his own at this early stage of the reading process —«Have you practis'd so long to learn to read/Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?» (26)—, the author puts forward the rewarding effect of the reader's training in the act of reading, the possession of «the origin of all poems»:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,...
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the
eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self (26).

The balance of the former text- reader asymmetry will be accomplished by resolving the indeterminacies of the text according to the reader's «stock of experience» and «horizon of expectations». These two act as a filtering system that conditions the final output produced by the addressee. In explaining how the reader response is stimulated by the text, Iser makes use of Austin's and Searle's theory of Speech Acts⁹. He concludes that some texts place the reader in a communicative situation that resembles that of the illocutionary act. In fact, this act designates those activities that involve promising, informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, etc. They all invite a response on the part of the reader and can be easily detected in Whitman's poem. We have already studied the initial promissory and informative tone of the poetic voice. Orders and warnings are also particularly frequent in the first sections of the poem. At this stage, Whitman adopts the role of the mentor and the teacher who lectures his students.

But the immediacy of the poet's message is not only the result of formal devices (the use of present tense and the imperative mood), but can also be appreciated at a content level. In section three, Whitman declares for the first time his blind devotion to the present:

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor nay 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 (26).

Similar statements are made throughout the poem: «There is no better than it and now» (40), «And mine a word of the modern, the word En- Masse» (40), ... The ultimate goal of this explicit obsession for the immediate is to compensate

⁹ The connection between «Song of Myself» and the Speech-Act Theory has been already modeled by C. Carroll Hollis, «Is There a Text in This Grass», *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 3.3 (1986): 1-14. Hollis refers to Whitman's poetry as «illocutionary».

the main deficiency of the literary language in relation to the Speech Acts: the lack of the actuality provided by the face to face communication. As C.C. Hollis suggests, «speech dies even as it is uttered (so, no speech as speech is ever literature unless put in permanent form), and writing cannot but lose the values of voice, rhythm, tonal variations, gesture»¹⁰. The great achievement of Whitman's poetry is to recreate the conditions of the speech, to convey the feeling that we are involved in a private dialogue with the writer, even though we are aware of the poem's condition of artifact. There are other obvious tokens of Whitman's preference for the speech voice and the immediate experience over literary convention, and so he writes aphorisms such as «A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books» (43) or «Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself» (43). Sometimes his skepticism extends to the language itself, as when he states the impossibility of conveying full meaning by words: «... you conceive too much of articulation» (43), he says, and concludes:

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 wholly confound the skeptic (44).

All these stylistic features tend to enhance the poem's oracular quality provoking a subsequent response in the reader. The poet's switch in tone when addressing his audience can be appreciated as early as in section ten. Instead of the imperative manners of the former stanzas, we have a token of Whitman's move towards comradeship with the audience: «You should have been with us that day round the chowder kettle» (31). The strategy is to involve the reader in the world of the poem, and make him participate in the literary work.

Seven sections later, the original text- reader disparity starts to become balanced:

These are really 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 (37).

The equality between text and reader seems to go beyond the bounds of friendship in the following sections, where it reaches its full intimacy: «This the touch of my lips to yours, this the murmur of yearning» (37). The physical nature of Whitman's approach adds a new dimension to his relationship with the reader. The latter is no longer a novice student in the hands of his poetic tutor, but a lover who stimulates the poet's sexual desire.

One of the central concepts Iser uses when talking about the phenomenology of reading is that of «the wandering viewpoint», which he conceives as a means to describe the different perspectives that the reader adopts as the reading progresses. These perspectives are continually questioned and modified, according to the reader's expectations of the future and his memories of the past. He is involved in an endless process of «consistency-building» which leads him ultimately to discover inner aspects of himself he had hitherto ignored.

¹⁰ Hollis, 20.

Self-awareness is also the main concern of «Song of Myself». Though a seeming omniscient «I» dominates the scene of the poem, this is not an individual but a composite persona who pretends to comprise all the virtual perspectives. The «I» in the poem becomes an embodiment of Iser's concept of the «wandering viewpoint». In section sixteen the poet gives a thorough account of his multiple identifications: «I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as of the wise» (36). Previously we had already witnessed his attempt to show himself as the cosmic consciousness of the world, a kind of cross section of all imaginable sorts of voices and vantage points. The poet's communicative intentions are made clear when he promises the reader access to his inner consciousness, as an omen of their final communion at the end of the poem: «All I mark as my own you shall offset with your own» (38). The task that Whitman's persona assigns to the reader is surprisingly similar to Iser's conception of the reader as «consistency-builder». In *The Act of Reading*, the latter develops the idea of how the wandering viewpoint «permits the reader to travel through the text ... unfolding the multiplicity of inter-connecting perspectives which are offset whenever there is a switch from one to another»¹¹.

As implied by Iser's concept of the wandering viewpoint, the reader's overcoming of his initial asymmetry in relation to the work requires the removal of textual ambiguities. These ambiguities are organized within a framework which Iser calls «structure of blanks», following Ingarden's notion of the «spots of indeterminacy»¹². The structure of blanks in the text determines the reader response, playing a central role in the communicative nature of the work.

J.B. Mason's and E.R. Birdsall's discussion of Whitman's strategies resemble Iser's analysis of the structure of blanks. Mason sees the «creation of doubt» in «Song of Myself» of main importance in order to hold the reader's attention and direct his activities¹³. Similarly, Birdsall considers «indirection» as the regulatory strategy of the poem. The most significant aspect of the piece is not what is explicitly revealed to us on the surface but what is dramatized within it: the relationship between language and poetry¹⁴.

This poetry of indirection, in which the reader is not a passive recipient but a participant, is explained by Whitman himself in his essay *Democratic Vistas*:

Books are to be call'd for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay - the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start of framework. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing (500-501).

¹¹ Iser 118.

¹² Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston, III: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 25.

¹³ Mason, 501.

¹⁴ Eric R. Birdsall, «Translating the Hints: Whitman's Theory of Poetry», *Walt Whitman Review*, 26.3 (1980): 113-123.

The same meditation can be found within «Song of Myself». By the end of the poem, and especially from section forty six, the calls for the reader's participation reach their height. The above-mentioned text-reader relationship endures a new transformation, which results in the privilege of the latter over the former. Whitman's invitation to the reader to co-create the poem reveals itself as a journey which the reader has to make on his own: «I tramp a perpetual journey ... / Not I, not anyone else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself» (64-5). However, the poet is always present offering his support: «If you tire, give me both burdens, and rest the chuff of your hand on my hip» (65).

But where this transformation can be fully appreciated is in the new roles played by poet and reader. The omnipresent «I» voice now becomes the listener, whereas the status of the addressed «you» is enhanced by this transformation into the new speaker of the poem: «You are also asking me questions and I hear your, / I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out by yourself» (64). The original asymmetry has been definitely balanced by the act of reading, and the promised communion with the poet is now a fact: «(It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you, / Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd)» (65).

As announced in the first stanza, the poet's tone in relation to his addressee has progressed from imperativeness to companionship, from the individual to the community, from «the selves» («I» and «you») to «one self» («Whitman» as a composite ensembled by the reader). This form of lyric *Bildungsroman* in which both poet and reader are able to formulate themselves foreshadows phenomenological analysis. It also thematizes Iser's theory about the constrictions of the text and the subsequent balance of the initial text-reader asymmetry.

The reader in «Song of Myself» is not the passive recipient of the traditional poetry, nor is he a voyeur who contemplates with pleasure the narcissistic display of an egotist. The hypothesis of Whitman's onanism is inconsistent since his ultimate goal is not self-gratification but communion with «the other». In this context, the role of the reader is to actualize the potential meaning of the text, to bring together its multiple perspectives. He becomes an active partner who acquires autonomy as the conclusion approaches. The author has achieved his goal of making the reader equal to and even transcending him, because, as Whitman himself states: «He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher» (65).