American Masters: 
Whitman and Dickinson 
by John Malcolm Brinnin

Preview

Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are the two writers at the core of American literature who most fully lived out Emerson’s call for *self-reliance*, yet they did so in vastly different ways. They looked deeply into nature and described their visions with burning intensity. They both found ways to be immersed in the world and isolated from it. They both created original styles. They both found the divine in the everyday.

As you read about Whitman and Dickinson, think about these questions:

• Where do you find poetry in American life today?
• Is poetry important to people?

The two greatest American poets of the nineteenth century were so different from each other, both as artists and as personalities, that only a nation as varied in character as the United States could possibly contain them.

Walt Whitman worked with bold strokes on a broad canvas; Emily Dickinson worked with the delicacy of a miniaturist. Whitman was sociable and loved company, a traveler; Dickinson was private and shy, content to remain in one secluded spot throughout her lifetime. While both poets were close observers of people and life’s daily activities, the emphasis they gave to what impressed them was so distinct as to make them opposites. Whitman was the public spokesman of the masses and the prophet of progress. “I hear America singing,” he said, and he joined his eloquent voice to that chorus. Dickinson was the obscure homebody, peering through the curtains of her house in a country town, who found in nature metaphors for the spirit and recorded them with no hope of an audience. Whitman expected that his celebration of universal brotherhood and the bright destiny of democracy would be carried like a message into the future. Dickinson expected nothing but a box in a dusty attic for the poetry that was her “letter to the World.”

Two Seams in the Fabric

Whitman’s career might be regarded as another American success story—the story of a pleasant young man who drifted into his thirties, working at one job after another, never finding himself until, at his own expense, he boldly published *Leaves of Grass* (1855). The book made him
famous around the world. Dickinson’s career as a poet began after her death. It is one of those ironies of history in which a writer dies unknown, only to have fame thrust upon her by succeeding generations.

Whitman and Dickinson represent two distinct seams in the fabric of American poetry, one slightly uneven and the other carefully measured and stitched tight. Whitman was as extravagant with words as he was careless with repetition and self-contradiction. Aiming for the large, overall impression, he filled his pages with long lists as he strained to catalog everything in sight. His technique is based on cadence—the long, easy sweep of sound that echoes the Bible and the speeches of orators and preachers. This cadence is the basis for his free verse—poetry without rhyme or meter.

Dickinson, on the other hand, wrote with the precision of a diamond cutter. Extremely careful in her choice of words, she aimed to evoke the feelings of things rather than simply name them. She was always searching for the one right phrase that would fix a thought in the mind. Her technique is economical, and her neat stanzas are controlled by the demands of rhyme and the meters she found in her hymn book.

**Models for Future Poets**

As the history of our poetry shows, both modes of expression have continued to be used by American writers. Both poets have served as models for later poets who have been drawn to the visions Dickinson and Whitman fulfilled and the techniques they mastered. Poetry as public speech written in the cadences of free verse remains a part of our literature; poetry as private observation, carefully crafted in rhyme and meter, still attracts young writers who tend to regard poems as experiences rather than statements.

The coequal importance of the two poetic methods has never been more clearly affirmed than in the following words by the American poet Ezra Pound (see page 648). Pound speaks for himself here as a poet who admired the tightness of Dickinson and disliked the expansiveness of Whitman. Nevertheless, he offers in this poem a blessing that represents the feeling of every poet who has envied the gemlike artistry of Dickinson and the all-embracing power of Whitman. A pact is an agreement. Pacts are usually made between people or groups or between nations who have quarreled with each other and are in the process of making up.

**A Pact**

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman—
I have detested you long enough.
I come to you as a grown child
Who has had a pig-headed father;
I am old enough now to make friends.
It was you that broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root—
Let there be commerce between us.

—Ezra Pound
The “new wood” Pound writes of is Whitman’s new brand of poetry—free verse, a poetry not bound by any rules of rhyme or meter. Pound may not have liked Whitman’s style, but, he says, all of our writing comes from one root and is fed by the same sap. We can learn from Whitman. Whitman and Dickinson together mark a turning point in American poetry.

**Walt Whitman**  
(1819–1892)

Less than a hundred years after the United States was founded, the new nation found its voice in a poet who spoke to all the world. His name was Walt Whitman, and he struck a note in literature that was as forthright, as original, and as deeply charged with democracy’s energies as the land that produced him.

**Student of the World**

Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, to parents of Dutch and English descent. They kept a farm in West Hills, Long Island, in what is today the town of Huntington. His father’s ancestors had come from England only twenty years after the landing of the *Mayflower* and had settled in Connecticut. On his mother’s side his ancestors were among the early immigrants from Holland who settled on Manhattan Island and along the Hudson River. Whitman and his seven brothers and sisters were able to assume their essential American-ness with an uncommon confidence. They knew their American grandparents, and they grew up in circumstances that allowed them both the communal experience of country life and the urban experience of a new city, Brooklyn, on its way to becoming a metropolis.

Here young Walter went to school until he was eleven. He then worked as an office clerk and printer’s assistant, and for a time he taught school. On weekends spent along the beaches and in the woods of Long Island, Whitman read Sir Walter Scott, the Bible, Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, and ancient Hindu poetry. He never became a scholar; he never went to college. Before Whitman was twenty, his feeling for the written word and his fascination with the boomtown atmosphere of Brooklyn led him to journalism. After ten years of that, he took a kind of working vacation—a difficult overland trip by train, horse-drawn coach, and riverboat to New Orleans. There he put his journalistic talent to work for the *Crescent* and his own talent for observation to work for himself. After a few months he returned to New York by way of the Great Lakes and a side trip to Niagara Falls. By this time, Whitman had added to his limited sense of America the experience of a wilderness surrendering its vastness to civilization. He also had become acquainted with the entirely alien culture that French Catholic New Orleans represented to him.

Back in Brooklyn, Whitman accepted an offer to serve as editor of the *Brooklyn Freeman*. For the next six or seven years he supplemented his income as a part-time carpenter and building contractor. All this while he was keeping notebooks and quietly putting together the sprawling collection of poems that would transform his life and change the course of American literature.
The Making of a Masterpiece

In 1855, Whitman published his collection at his own expense under the title *Leaves of Grass*. Since the book was too boldly new and strange to win the attention of reviewers or readers who had fixed ideas about poetry, its publication went all but unnoticed. To stir up interest, he sent samples to people whose endorsement he thought might be useful. One of these samples reached Ralph Waldo Emerson, who at once wrote to Whitman the most important letter Whitman would ever receive:

Concord, Massachusetts, 21 July, 1855

Dear Sir—I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass*. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy Nature, as if too much handiwork, or too much lymph in the temperament, were making our Western wits fat and mean.

I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire.

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging.

I did not know until I last night saw the book advertised in a newspaper that I could trust the name as real and available for a post-office. I wish to see my benefactor, and have felt much like striking my tasks and visiting New York to pay you my respects.

—R. W. Emerson

The “long foreground” of which Emerson wrote had not been the careful, confident period of preparation to which many poets devote themselves before they are ready to publish. Instead, it had been a precarious existence. Journalism had kept Whitman going financially, but not even the editorials he wrote for the *Brooklyn Eagle* had brought him distinction. On the surface at least, his “long foreground” of preparation had been a mixture of hack work and jack-of-all-trades ingenuity.

By the time he was ready to declare himself a poet and to publish the first version of his book, Walt Whitman was unique. *Leaves of Grass* is a masterpiece that Whitman was to expand and revise through many editions. Its process of growth did not end until the ninth, “deathbed” edition was published in 1891, thirty-six years after its first appearance. It is a spiritual autobiography that tells the story of an enchanted observer who says who he is at every opportunity and claims what he loves by naming it. “Camerado,” he wrote, “this is no book / Who touches this touches a man.”
In the Crowd, but Not of It

The figure we know today as Walt Whitman was conceived and created by the poet himself. Whitman endorsed his image and sold it to the public with a promoter’s skill worthy of P. T. Barnum, the great show manager of the nineteenth century. At first glance that figure is a bundle of contradictions. Whitman seems to have had the theatrical flair of a con artist and the selfless dignity of a saint; the sensibility of an artist and the carefree spirit of a hobo; the blustery egotism of a braggart and the demure shyness of a shrinking violet. On second glance these contradictions disappear: Walt Whitman was everything he seemed to be. The figure he so carefully crafted and put on display was not a surrogate but the man himself.

“One would see him afar off,” wrote the great naturalist John Burroughs, “in the crowd but not of it—a large, slow-moving figure, clad in gray, with broad-brimmed hat and gray beard—or, quite as frequently, on the front platform of the street horse-cars with the driver…. Whitman was of large mold in every way, and of bold, far-reaching schemes, and is very sure to fare better at the hands of large men than of small. The first and last impression which his personal presence always made upon one was of a nature wonderfully gentle, tender, and benignant…. I was impressed by the fine grain and clean, fresh quality of the man…. He always had the look of a man who had just taken a bath.”

If there is a side of Whitman that today we would associate with image building, or self-promotion, there is nothing in his poetry to suggest that it was anything but the product of the kind of genius that permanently changes the history of art. He modified standard, king’s-English diction and abandoned traditional rhyme schemes and formal meters in favor of the rhythms and speech patterns of free verse.

Everything Under the Sun

The result was poetry that could sing and speak of everything under the sun. Its sweep was easy, and its range was broad. Suddenly poetry was no longer a matter of organized word structures that neatly clicked shut at the last line; instead, it was a series of open-ended units of rhythm that flowed one into the other and demanded to be read in their totality.

“Whitman throws his chunky language at the reader,” writes the critic Paul Zweig. “He cajoles and thunders; he chants, celebrates, chuckles, and caresses. He spills from his capacious American soul every dreg of un-Englishness, every street sound thumbing its nose at traditional subject matter and tone. Here is Samson pulling the house of literature down around his ears, yet singing in the ruins.”

Walt Whitman had invented a way of writing poetry that perfectly accommodated his way of seeing. His form is loose enough to allow for long lists and catalogs abundant in detail; it is also flexible enough to include delicate moments of lyricism as well as stretches of blustering oratory. This form served Whitman as observer and prophet—as a private man tending the wounded in the hospital wards of the Civil War and as the public man who gave voice to the grief of a nation in his great elegy for the slain Abraham Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.”
An American Epic

When Whitman died, in 1892, he had met a great personal goal. He had enlarged the possibilities of American poetry to include the lyricism of simple speech and the grand design of the epic. How is *Leaves of Grass* like an epic? Who is its hero? What is its action? The hero is the poet, and he is a hero not of the ancient past but of the future. As in all epics the action takes the form of a journey. In *Leaves of Grass*, the journey is the one the speaker takes as he becomes a poet:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul…
I am the poet of the woman the same as the man…
I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also….

By the end of his epic journey, which even takes him down into a kind of hell, the poet has also been transformed. The “I” has become identified with every element in the universe and has been reborn as something divine. The poet has become the saving force that Whitman believed was the true role of the American poet.

Nothing quite like it had ever been done in America before.

Emily Dickinson
(1830–1886)

A brief outline of Emily Dickinson’s life reads like the plot of a story destined to become a legend. Once upon a time there was born to a religious and well-to-do New England family a daughter, whom they named Emily. As a child, she was lively, well behaved, and obedient; she took pleasure in the busy household of which she was a part and in the seasonal games, parties, and outings of a village snowy cold in winter and brilliantly green and flowering in summer. At home Emily learned to cook and sew. When she was old enough, she was sent to a school where strict rules did not dampen the girls’ high spirits as they enjoyed the entertainments of boarding-school life. Emily took part in these, but not always with as much enthusiasm as she might have. As she said many years later, something sad and reserved in her nature made her “a mourner among the children.”

To her family and friends everything about the young Dickinson seemed normal. No one doubted that she would grow gracefully into womanhood, make a good marriage, and settle into a village life of churchgoing, holiday gatherings, and neighborly harmony. Then something happened in her life, something that has been the subject of speculation for decades. When Dickinson was twenty-four years old, her father, who had become a U.S. congressman, took her with him to Washington, D.C., and then on to Philadelphia. The journey seems to have marked the start of a turning point in her life. Her father may have taken her with him because she had fallen in love with someone she could never marry. This person might have been a married lawyer, older than Emily, a man who would die that year of tuberculosis. Whatever happened, it seems likely that in the course of the journey, Emily fell in love with someone else: Charles Wadsworth, who was also married and who was pastor of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Letters to Wadsworth show that Dickinson saw him as a “muse,” someone who could inspire her, someone she could love passionately in her imagination.
In 1862, Wadsworth took up a new assignment in San Francisco. His leaving seems to have caused a great crisis in Dickinson’s life: “I sing,” she wrote around this time, “as the boy does by the burying ground, because I am afraid.”

**The Recluse of Amherst**

The young woman quietly and abruptly withdrew from all social life except that involving her immediate family. Within a few years, dressed always in white—like the bride she would never become—she had gone into a state of seclusion. Her only activities were household tasks and the writing of poems that she either kept to herself or sent as valentines, birthday greetings, or notes to accompany the gift of a cherry pie or a batch of cookies.

Around the time that Wadsworth was preparing to move to California, Dickinson sent a few of her poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. As an editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Higginson had been encouraging the work of younger poets. Higginson never became a substitute for Wadsworth, but he did serve as a kindly, distant “teacher” and “mentor.” Eventually Dickinson gave up hope of ever finding a wider audience than her few friends and relatives. During her lifetime, Emily Dickinson published no more than a handful of her typically brief poems. She seemed to lack all concern for an audience, and she went so far as to instruct her family to destroy any poems she might leave behind after her death. Still, she saw to it that bundles of handwritten poems were carefully wrapped and put away in places where, after her death, friendly, appreciative, and finally astonished eyes would find them. The poems were assembled and edited by different family members and friends; they were then published in installments so frequent that readers began to wonder when they would ever end.

Then, in 1955, a collection called *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* was finally made available. This was the devoted work of Thomas H. Johnson, a scholar who, unlike Dickinson’s earlier editors, refrained from making “presentable” entities of poems whose punctuation, rhyme schemes, syntax, and word choice were frequently baffling. Instead, he attempted to remain faithful to the original manuscript.

As a result of Johnson’s research, whole generations of readers who had grown up on Dickinson poems were faced with new versions of those poems, versions that sometimes rescued Dickinson’s originals from the tamperings of her first editors. Sometimes these originals made emphases that, in the interest of “smoothness,” those editors had overlooked.

Here is an example of how one stanza was changed by the original editors. Johnson’s version is first:

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We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—
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This is how the early editor changed it:

We passed the school, where children
played
Their lessons scarcely done;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.

The Secret of Genius

When Dickinson died, at the age of fifty-five, hardly anyone knew that the strange, shy woman in their midst was a poet whose sharp and delicate voice would echo for generations to come. Some seventy years after her death, when the quarrels among her relatives who had inherited her manuscripts had died down and all her poems were finally published, she was recognized as one of the greatest poets America, and perhaps the world, had produced.

The self-imposed restrictions of Dickinson’s actual life were more than matched by her ability to see the universal in the particular and vice versa. She perceived the relationship between a drop of dew and a flood, between a grain of sand and a desert. These perceptions helped her make metaphors that embraced experiences far beyond the limited compass of Amherst village life. Still, no matter how far her imagination ranged, Dickinson never denied those experiences their truth as aspects of a cycle of existence important in itself. When an Amherst neighbor’s barn caught fire and lit up the sky, it was a real barn at the edge of a real pasture, and its loss became a matter of local anguish. These local actualities did not prevent Dickinson from regarding the incident as a reminder of ultimate doom, of the biblical prophecies of destruction of the earth by fire.

Behind the now famous legend of Emily Dickinson, and the plays and novels that have romanticized and sentimentalized her life, is a woman whose genius made its own rules, followed its own commands, and found its own fulfillment. Emily Dickinson’s life as a recluse may have been richer, more varied, and—in the satisfactions that come with the exercise of natural talent—even happier than the lives of those around her. In the prospect of history, we can see that the untold secret of Emily Dickinson’s emotional life is secondary to the great secret of her genius, the secret that destiny would not let her keep.
Tell all the Truth but tell it slant
Emily Dickinson

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—
Success is counted sweetest
Emily Dickinson

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

5 Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated—dying—

10 On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!
Much Madness is divinest Sense
Emily Dickinson

Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a discerning Eye—
Much Sense—the starkest Madness—
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail—
Assent—and you are sane—
Demur—you're straightway dangerous—
And handled with a Chain—
Because I could not stop for Death
Emily Dickinson

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

5 We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove

10 At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—

15 For only Gossamer,* my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—* in the Ground—

20 Since then—’tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity—
I heard a Fly buzz—when I died
Emily Dickinson

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—

5 The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room—

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away
10 What portion of me be
Assignable—and then it was
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
15 And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—
“*A Noiseless Patient Spider*” epitomizes the yearning for universal love, which gives Whitman’s view of democracy a mystical character. The poet throws filament after filament—line after line, poem after poem—hoping to connect with readers.

**A Noiseless Patient Spider**  
**Walt Whitman**

A noiseless patient spider,  
I mark’d where on a little promontory it stood isolated,  
Mark’d how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,  
It launch’d forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,  
5 Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,  
Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,  
10 Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.
O Captain! My Captain!
Walt Whitman

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;

But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;

Here Captain! dear father!
The arm beneath your head!
It is some dream that on the deck,
You’ve fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;

Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.
A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim
Walt Whitman

A sight in camp in the daybreak gray and dim,
As from my tent I emerge so early sleepless,
As slow I walk in the cool fresh air the path near by the hospital tent,
Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there untended lying,

Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woolen blanket,
Gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.

Curious I halt and silent stand,
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first just lift the blanket;
Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-gray’d hair, and flesh all sunken about the eyes?

Who are you my dear comrade?

Then to the second I step—and who are you my child and darling?
Who are you sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming?

Then to the third—a face nor child nor old, very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white ivory;
Young man I think I know you—I think this face is the face of the Christ himself,

Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.
I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loaf and invite my soul,

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

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.
In Song of Myself, Whitman presents the philosophical notion that everyone is part of the whole of nature. In number 6, he uses grass to symbolize humankind’s relationship to the universe.

from Song of Myself (6)
Walt Whitman

A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
5 A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic;
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
10 Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff; I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
15 It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers’ laps,
And here you are the mothers’ laps.

The grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
20 Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

25 What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
20 And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas’ed the moment life appear’d.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.
from Song of Myself (10)
Walt Whitman

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,
Kindling a fire and broiling the fresh-killed game,

Falling asleep on the gather’d leaves with my dog and gun by my side.

The Yankee clipper is under her sky-sails,° she cuts the sparkle and scud,°
My eyes settle the land, I bend at her prow or shout joyously from the deck.
The boatmen and clam-diggers arose early and stopt for me,
I tuck’d my trowser-ends in my boots and went and had a good time;

You should have been with us that day round the chowder-kettle.

I saw the marriage of the trapper in the open air in the far west, the bride was a red girl,
Her father and his friends sat near cross-legged and dumbly smoking, they had moccasins

to their feet and large thick blankets hanging from their shoulders,
On a bank lounged the trapper, he was dressed mostly in skins, his luxuriant beard and curls
protected his neck, he held his bride by the hand,
She had long eyelashes, her head was bare, her coarse straight locks descended upon her
voluptuous limbs and reached to her feet.

The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside,
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy° and weak,
And went where he sat on a log and led him in and assured him,
And brought water and fill’d a tub for his sweated body and bruis’d feet,

And gave him a room that enter’d 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 stayed with me a week before he was recuperated and pass’d north,
I had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean’d in the corner.
from Song of Myself (52)
Walt Whitman

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
5 It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow’d wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
10 If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fiber your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
15 Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.