Thinkers

Third Edition

Michael Clay Thompson

Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

Introduction

This book is called *Thinkers* as a triple reference. Education is all about thinkers. The thinkers described in these chapters, such as George Eliot, Kenneth Clark, Jonathan Swift, Frederick Douglass, and Kay Gibbons, not only form part of the essential contact that makes an educated mind, but they also serve as edifying prototypes of the thinking mind. To read them is to ride the stream of exploratory thought, whether it descends the rocky channels of fiction or the clear-winding rills of nonfiction.

The ultimate audience for this book is a second group of thinkers: students who are learning about the life of the mind and who think they want to think. Intellectually motivated students are among the finest thinkers in the world. They have open minds and a readiness for surprise, and the shorelines of their minds are unspoiled by prior biases.

The third group of thinkers is the instructors (who may be parents) who will read this book as a way to energize their own thinking about the ideas discussed and who may either use these essays to prepare for class or provide them directly to their students.

Current educational literature is vastly about who we educate and why we educate and how we educate. There is a hole in the theoretical ozone layer. These essays are in part an attempt to address that gap. They are a kind of direct guided tour of the life of the mind.

In these essays I hope that the reader will see thoughtful books and films as a kind of existential algebra, each book providing another equation for describing our world and our life in it.

Chapter Fifteen

Leaves of Grass
Walt Whitman

If Shakespeare is the Shakespeare of England, and Cervantes is the Shakespeare of Spain, and Hugo is the Cervantes of France, and Homer is the Hugo of Greece, and Goethe is the Hugo of Germany, and Virgil is the Goethe of Rome, and Dante is the Virgil of Italy, and Pushkin is the Dante of Russia, and García Márquez is the Pushkin of Latin America, then who is the García Márquez of the United States?

Well, is there any immortal literature that has been written in the United States? What literature of ours is definitive, is the prototype of its genre, is the *locus classicus* for a type of literary character, is a landmark in literary art, is on the short list of truly great books of the world? What American writer can withstand being mentioned in the same breath as Dante? As Goethe? As Tolstoy? What American writer is studied in all of the world's great universities and is venerated by writers and poets the world over?

It would be tempting to suggest Mark Twain, and Twain does possess some of these intimations of immortality, but his clouds of glory make thin trails that shrink to insignificance against the great sky of Shakespeare and Goethe. Twain simply was not, for all his appeal and originality, a writer of the necessary magnitude. He lacked...existential power.

It would be tempting, and surely more appropriate, to suggest Herman Melville. More than his more frequently read friend Hawthorne, Melville contributed a massive, impressive, and philosophically powerful book. *Moby Dick* is without a doubt a work of magnitude, written in a burst of shocking genius, experimental to its bones, and profoundly involved in the basis of life's meaning. *Moby Dick* possesses a little world of immortal characters—Ishmael, Queequeg, and Ahab—and draws its language from an array of other literature, including Shakespeare's *King Lear*. And it would be no certain strike against Melville that *Moby Dick* is a single masterpiece, which Melville was unable to equal in his subsequent works; the same could be said of Cervantes, Hugo, Goethe, Dante, and Tolstoy.

Even the other Shakespeares were no Shakespeare, who was himself the author not only of *Hamlet* but also of *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Julius Caesar*, and many others, any one of which would have made an author immortal.

No, even though his greatness resides in only one book, Melville would be an intelligent nomination for the American Shakespeare.

But even compared to Melville, there is an American literary genius whose work is unique in world literature, far more so than Melville's. After all, Melville did not invent the novel or even revolutionize its form. Melville probed deeply into the souls of his characters, and perhaps deeply into the meaning of existence, but his thinking seems not utterly unlike other ideas we have known. Many authors have explored evil, and fate, and futility. As good as Melville was, there are others like him.

There is no one like Whitman.

For an author of global scope and influence who was a first-magnitude original, whose work is as American as

Goethe's is German, whose book is a necessity of life, who was as richly human as Chaucer or Cervantes, who redefined the limits of literary art both in form and in idea, whose thinking continues to have profound importance a century after his death, whose ideas are Dante-vast in scope—for an author like this, American can produce only Whitman.

There is no one, no one at all, like Whitman.

As everyone knows, Emerson was the first to recognize the improbable force of the newcomer Whitman's accomplishment. Emerson wrote to Whitman, congratulating him on "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed." Emerson marveled that he had never heard of Whitman before; he knew that such a beginning must have had a long history somewhere.

Of course, it had. Like most of the great creators, Whitman was a voracious reader who loved, among others, Goethe and Sir Walter Scott. And Whitman was a reader of humanity; he was a haunter of locales, an observer of individuals, a converser who stored up, over a period of decades, like a hirsute Jane Goodall recording the behavior of jungle chimps, the multitudinous manifestations of humans being human beings.

Whitman loved people.

Even today, long after generations of Whitman-influenced poets have jaded our ears, and a century of clamor has forced all but the most brow-ridged Neanderthals to affect enlightenment, we still open *Leaves of Grass*, and especially "Song of Myself," with a shock.

My word, Whitman first published this anthem of equality in 1855.

1855.

To get farther ahead of your time than that, you would have to go to someone like, say, Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 is, well, impossible. It must have been written centuries later by an imposter who foisted a literary fraud off on the unsuspecting literati. Read *Vindication*, and ask yourself who is more advanced: Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, or George Eliot.

In 1855, with slavery still in effect and women still denied effective lives, with everyone agreeing that God, the soul, and heaven were good, but humanity, the body, and the world were bad—in this decade before the Civil War, Whitman published the greatest single work of creative optimism in world literature.

Breaking the darkness of Puritanism, Whitman enunciated a poetry of acceptance: acceptance of self, of sex, of both sexes, of the body, of the world, of humanity.

The ghost of Jonathan Edwards, who had told his congregation that the God of Heaven abhorred them and held them over the fires of Hell like loathsome spiders that He wished to drop into the purifying flames, must have sat up in its grave, for with neither warning nor apology, Whitman began his breakout from humanity's self-condemnation:

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

More revolutionary than Mark Twain's use of illiterate narration, this was a philosophical shot heard 'round the world. You are not bad, it said. You are not evil or shameful. Your desires are natural. Your body is good. You are lucky to be human and lucky to live in this world of miracles. Like Jesus telling humanity that the poor in spirit are blessed, Whitman identified with all and proclaimed that he was "of the foolish, just as much as the wise."

To women who lived in a rough America, where Man was men and women would not vote in the century, Whitman brought a new truth: "Out of the dimness," he wrote, "opposite equals advance."

Opposite equals.

Advance.

Out of dimness.

More than a century later, these words still bring a chill to our spines. And Whitman did not stop there:

> I am the poet of the woman the same as the
>   man,
> And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a
>   man,
> And I say there is nothing greater than the
>   mother of men.

To African-Americans, free and slave, who lived in an evil society scarcely imaginable today, Whitman brought a new portrayal, not of a cringing stereotype but of a man:

> The negro holds firmly the reins of his four
>   horses, the block swags underneath on its
>   tied-over chain,
> The negro that drives the long dray of the stone-
>   yard, steady and tall he stands pois'd on one
>   leg on the string-piece,
> His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast
>   and loosens over his hip-band,
> His glance is calm and commanding, he
>   tosses the slouch of his hat away from his
>   forehead....

To the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe poetry, Whitman brought a new voice of democracy: "I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own," he wrote, "And that all the men ever born are also my brothers." Moving beyond generality, Whitman identified and described hundreds of men and women: sweethearts, old maids, laborers ("And there is no trade or employment but the young man following it may become a hero"), criminals, officers, hospital patients, politicians, and prostitutes. For all, he offered unconditional commiseration:

> 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,
> (Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer
> you;)

He did not. "Whoever degrades another," Whitman proclaimed, "degrades me." No one, within the word-world of Whitman's poem, would be rejected:

> This is the meal equally set, this the meat for
> natural hunger,
> It is for the wicked just the same as the
> righteous, I make appointments with all,
> I will not have a single person slighted or left
> away,
> The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby
> invited,
> The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee
> is invited;
> There shall be no difference between them and
> the rest.

For words such as these, even in poems, tyrants have dashed brains. But Whitman was undeterred by any threat.

"My gait," he announced, "is no fault-finder's or rejecter's gait." For elitists, snobs, and aristocrats of all kinds in all places, Whitman had a new message: "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."

Nothing.

"And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy," Whitman wrote, "walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud."

These are the Beatitudes of Democracy.

Blessed are the persons.

For theirs is the United States.

Women, blacks, individuals of all stripes—all were included in the glow of a new acceptance, and Whitman then took his poem deeper, to the structures within the individual, to feelings of shame and bodily self-contempt: "I am the poet of the Body," Whitman said, "and I am the poet of the Soul, / The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me, / The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue."

A new tongue for the Body and the Soul: "Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen, / Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn."

A new tongue:

> Undrape! you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor
>   discarded,
> I see through the broadcloth and gingham
>   whether or no,
> And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless,
>   and cannot be shaken away.

For Whitman, the body was a miracle: "I cannot tell how my ankles bend, nor whence the cause of my faintest wish."

In fact, for Whitman, every object and phenomenon was a miracle:

> I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the
>   journey-work of the stars,
> And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of
>   sand, and the egg of the wren,
> And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the
>   highest,
> And the running blackberry would adorn the
>   parlors of heaven,
> And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to
>   scorn all machinery,
> And the cow crunching with depress'd head
>   surpasses any statue,
> And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger
>   sextillions of infidels.

A pismire is an ant, and a *chef-d'oeuvre* is a masterpiece, and if you think Whitman was exaggerating about the mouse, consider this experiment: we will have all nations of the world combine their gross national products for a decade, and pool the best scientists on the planet, and give them ten years to build a mouse. If they fail, they all have to memorize the sermons of Jonathan Edwards.

Whitman's words are not hyperbole; they are profoundly visionary. A mouse, or a leaf of grass, or the narrowest hinge in our hands, is infinitely beyond the ability of human science to reproduce. We are surrounded, always and everywhere, by myriad miracles that would stagger sextillions of infidels, but we are so jaded by experience that we are blind to the wonder of the world. We are not as a little child and cannot enter the heaven around us. But Whitman wanted us to see again: "I or you pocketless of a dime," he wrote, "may purchase the pick of the earth."

For a caring reader, *Leaves of Grass* is overwhelming; it is a victorious overcoming, through sheer force of mind and imagination, of cultural limitations that were the product of centuries of Western civilization.

Whitman can be criticized, even ridiculed. In his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D.H. Lawrence did ridicule him. To Whitman's "I am he that aches of amorous love," Lawrence jeered, "Walter, you are not he. You are just a foolish little Walter." But brilliant critics also have seen the greatness of Whitman. Read Randall Jarrell's discussion of Whitman in his perspicuous *Poetry and the Age*. Perhaps it takes a poet like Jarrell to see the poetry in Whitman's deceptive free verse, in lines like:

> The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of
>   his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp

or:

> The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's
>   table,
> What is removed drops horribly in a pail

Even if we are deaf to the whistly and wobbly sounds of these lines, we must still be impressed by the encyclopedic reach of Whitman's imagination.

It might be true that Dante's *Divine Comedy*, especially the *Inferno*, is the greatest single feat of human imagination. The sheer number of Dante's images, the bravery of the attempt (describing Hell?), and the quality of poetic and philosophic power leave us in literary awe. But Whitman's feat of imagination in *Leaves of Grass* has a similar magnitude and originality. Read carefully through the catalog passages where Whitman enumerates his hosts of individuals, his encyclopedia of vignettes. *Leaves of Grass* is the book in which—more than any other in world literature—one human being deliberately and methodically imagined himself to be everyone else. Swiftly, but with uncanny accuracy, Whitman skimmed through other people's selves, identifying, sympathizing, understanding, compassionating:

> The little one sleeps in its cradle,
> I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently
>   brush away flies with my hand.
> The youngster and the red-faced girl turn aside
>   up the bushy hill,
> I peeringly view them from the top.
> The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the
>   bedroom,
> I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note
>   where the pistol has fallen.

or:

> The pedler sweats with his pack on his back, (the
>   purchaser higgling about the odd cent;)
> The bride unrumples her white dress, the
>   minute-hand of the clock moves slowly,
> The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and
>   just-open'd lips,

or:

> The crew of the fish-smack pack repeated layers
>   of halibut in the hold,
> The Missourian crosses the plains toting his
>   wares and his cattle

On and on: flatboatmen, patriarchs, coon-seekers, drovers, deck-hands, squaws, marksmen, Yankees, Kentuckians, Californians:

Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and
religion,
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor,
quaker,
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician,
priest.

In no other book has one person so extended the tendrils of his imagination into the lives of all around him, seeing each life through its own eyes, feeling each person through the reality of its own reactions. This effort of Whitman's was not simply spontaneous poetic writing; it was intellectual, poetic, and spiritual and must have taken him years of intense observation and empathy. His family thought he was a bum; all he ever did was stand around and watch, but what watching! Whitman did for humanity what Leonardo did for the phenomena of nature: see. When asked the secret of his art, Leonardo answered *saper vedere*, to know how to see. Whitman taught himself that in order to see, one must first look, and it was his years of looking that formed the long beginning that Emerson guessed at in his congratulatory letter.

And as we continue to reread Whitman, we are struck by a curious effect: the aura of egotism that seems so salient in our early readings abates and is replaced by a kind of humble serenity and wisdom. "These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me," he wrote, "If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing."

Sometimes the wisdom surprises us with the unrealized obvious:

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.

Sometimes the wisdom gives us fresh perceptions of our hierarchies:

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of
poems?
Stop this day and night with me and you shall
possess the origin of all poems.

Sometimes the wisdom combines the love of God with the paradox of Socrates:

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,
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?

In the end, Whitman did not present himself as the answer or the origin of answers. In the last pages of "Song of Myself," he emphasized the path of the individual: "Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself." And: "You are also asking me questions and I hear you, / I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for yourself."

He approached the limits of poetry and comprehension:

> There is that in me—I do not know what it is—
> but I know it is in me....
> I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word
> unsaid,
> It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol....

Even the seemingly invincible limits of logic gave way to a profounder wisdom:

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then I contradict myself.
> (I am large, I contain multitudes.)

"Song of Myself" ends with a simple invitation: "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another, / I stop somewhere waiting for you." Whitman's words are still waiting for us, and in searching among them, we are perhaps reading the best book, to use Emerson's words, "that America has yet contributed."