4. The Poet of the New World

_Boston, 1841–New York, 1855_

Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await. Dante’s praise is, that he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher, or into universality. We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer; then in the middle age; then in Calvinism. Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, methodism and unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy, and the temple of Delphos, and are as swiftly passing away. Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.¹

These lines are taken from a text simply titled _The Poet_, drawn from one of the lectures Emerson delivered in December 1841 and January 1842 under the generic title _The Times_. As Emerson

---

thoroughly modified his text for publication in 1844 in the second series of the *Essays*, it does not seem that the audience assembled under the roof of Boston's Masonic Temple ever heard this profession of faith. We do not know how it would have received this invitation to abandon English encyclopaedias and the relics of Greek and Roman antiquity to go and find new religion and poetry in the fisheries of the East Coast, the pioneers out West, the prose of daily newspapers, electoral jousting or banking. It is true that the former Unitarian pastor was not new to the art of provocation. He had already urged his audiences more than once to reject the conspiracy of centuries past, and to bid farewell to the policed museums of Europe, to *Doric* columns and gothic ornaments, in order to fully embrace the present. 'I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic', he had already announced, to the shock of the Harvard fellows, 'what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds.'

We must thus take note: it was not in London under the glass-and-steel acres of the Crystal Palace, nor in the *fin de siècle* Paris of the Eiffel tower, in the New York of skyscrapers or Russia of futurist and constructivist revolutionaries; it was in Boston in 1841, capital of genteel culture, intellectuals and aesthetes enthused by classical philology, French civility, and voyages to Italy for its antique ruins and Renaissance masterpieces, that the modernist ideal, in the strong sense, was first formulated in all its radicalism – the ideal of a new poetry of new man.

But one must also notice where the paradox lies in this declaration. The man who announces it has no personal taste for banking, or electoral stands: he thinks they turn man away from the only worthwhile quest – namely, the accomplishment of his own nature. And if he loves the calm of the countryside, it is so as to be there alone with his thoughts or with kindred spirits, and not in order to get involved with the activities of fishermen or the amusements of lumberjacks. He never travelled to the plantations of the South. And the conquest of the West, or the recent annexations of Texas and Oregon, were only known to him through newspapers. Their evocation here does not at all have to do with a personal passion for the great adventure of a new people and virgin lands. First of all, it defines change in the poetic paradigm: the poetry of the present time breaks with a certain idea of time, one regulated by great events and rhythms inherited from the past. It finds its material no longer in historical succession, but in geographical simultaneity, in the multiplicity of activities distributed in the diverse spaces of a territory. It finds its form no longer in regular meter inherited from tradition, but in the common pulse that links these activities.

But one must not be mistaken: the common pulse that the new poet must make sensible in the material activities of the new world is itself entirely spiritual. The ideal of the new poet can reject refined muses, and the norm of the 'American Scholar' to call for 'the single man [who] plant[s] himself indomitably on his instincts'. However, in these proud proclamations there is nothing that could be attributed to some naive materialist intoxication of the pioneering people of the new continent. Quite the contrary: if the new poet can and must take up the materialities of modern America, it is in order to denounce true materialism, which is embodied by the English empiricist and sensualist tradition. This tradition begins by enclosing material things within the limits of utility and abstractions of ownership, before opposing this vulgar world to the select world of spiritual pleasures. Materialism is the dualism that separates the material from the spiritual by separating particular things from the life of the whole. The task of the American poet is to restore the vulgar materialities of the world of work and everyday life to the life of the mind and the whole. It is to contrast the English sensualist aristocracy with the spiritual revolution carried out, during the time of the French Revolution, by German philosophers. They extricated the spiritual life sealed within any sensible reality, awaiting the thought that must liberate it. The call to sing the prosaicness of American life can thus be translated strictly in these seemingly mystic lines that, however, say exactly the same thing:

---


3 Ibid., p. 69.
We are symbols, and inhabit symbols; workman, work and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and, being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue into every dumb and inanimate object. He perceives the independence of the thought on the symbol, the stability of the thought, the accidenty and fugacity of the symbol. As the eyes of Lyceus were said to see through the earth, so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For, through that better perception, he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or the metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form... All the facts of the animal economy, sex, nutriment, gestation, birth, growth, are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change, and reappear a new and higher fact. He uses forms according to the life, and not according to the form.\footnote{Emerson, 'The Poet', pp. 12–13.}

In a few lines, Emerson gives us the epitome of German idealist philosophy – as Coleridge and Carlyle translated it for the Anglophone world, and as it was adapted to their use by these American 'Transcendentalists' concerned with a new religion of life, breaking the circle of intellectual and social conformity determined by the conjunction between the American spirit of ownership, Calvinist rigour and Lockean empiricism. The layers of the edifice are easily discernible here. First, there is the double distinction carried out by Kantian transcendental philosophy: on the one hand, the separation of phenomena and things in themselves; on the other, the definition of aesthetic judgment in its double opposition to the law of the understanding that makes things knowable and to the particularity of desire that wants to appropriate them. Kant devoted himself to separating the two distinctions. In contrast, his successors strove to reunite them in order to make aesthetic contemplation the path leading from the finite intellectual determination of phenomena to absolute knowing. But he had facilitated the task for them himself in the passage from the Critique of the Power of Judgment that mentions the cipher language by which nature speaks to us symbolically through its beautiful forms.\footnote{Immanuel Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, transl. and ed. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), § 42, p. 180.} This cipher language had found its immediate echo in reflections by Novalis that made everything into encrypted speech and language itself into a vast poem. It had served the young Schelling to confer a strategic position on artistic knowledge in the System of Transcendental Idealism, at the price of wedding the tradition of critical idealism with that of neo-platonic metaphysics: 'What we speak of as nature is a poem sealed in a mysterious and wonderful script. Yet the riddle could be unveiled, were we to recognize in it the odyssey of the spirit, which, strangely deluded, seeks itself, and in seeking flies from itself; for the meaning we seek glimmers through the sensible world, as it does through words, and through the dissolving mists which alone reveal the land of fancy where our desires are headed. Each beautiful painting is born, as it were, when an invisible barrier dividing the real from the ideal world is removed...\footnote{Schelling, System of Transcendental Idealism, transl. Peter Heath (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1993), p. 232. We know the influence this text had on the German romanticists, especially through August Schlegel's Lectures on Art and Literature. On this point, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, L'Absolu littéraire (Paris: Le Seuil, 1978); The Literary Absolute, transl. P. Barnard and C. Lester (Albany: SUNY, 1988).}

Breaking this barrier separating two worlds was the very principle of the 'natural supernaturalism' promoted by Carlyle, and it is still the programme attributed by Emerson to the new poet. The poem is a mirror held up to things, to furnish an image of every created thing. No doubt this mirror 'carried through the street'\footnote{Emerson, 'The Poet', p. 23.} is a metaphor shared by quite diverse minds: one can find it in almost the same form in the least mystic writer of the time, Stendhal, who himself attributes it to Saint-Réal. But we should try to understand its function here. Surely the mirror should not be considered a reflective surface that gives off reflections of things. It is a polished surface, cleansed of any dross so that things of ordinary life can appear in it cleansed of everything that attaches them to utility and propriety, organized according to the divine order of the 'procession' which, according to Plotinus, expresses the supersensible ordering of sensible things. But the opposite is equally true: the ideal world is
not another world; it is the same as the one we live in. This is another lesson of the so-called Idealist philosophers: poetry is not a world of rare sentiments felt by exceptional beings and expressed in specific forms. Poetry is the flowering of a form of life, the expression of a poeiticity immanent to the ways of life of a people and its individuals. Poetry exists in poems only if it already exists latently in forms of life. It exists in the 'pre-rcantations' offered by forms of nature: sea, mountainous peak, Niagara, or any bed of flowers whose attuned ear hears and understands the poem and tries to put it into words; in the rhymes presented by the knottiness of seashells, the savage ode of the tempest and the epic song of summer and harvests, but just as well in the blade of grass or the drop of water which is 'a little ocean'; in the meat on the fire, the boiling milk, the shop, the cart and the account book. It exists in the sensations, gestures and attitudes of these peasants, grooms, coachmen, hunters and butchers, who celebrate the symbolic potential of nature 'in the choice of their life, and not in their choice of words'. Finally, it exists in words, of which everyone is a silent poem, the translation of an original relation with those other words that are visible things.

Emerson thus exceeds the thought of the author from whom he borrows his idea of the poet as creator of symbols, namely Carlyle. For the latter, the symbols of the spiritual world present in the natural order were to be found in flags, banners and standards, in works of art, examples of heroic characters and the vestimentary parade of dandies. For Emerson, the symbols of the spiritual world can be found everywhere. The task of the poet is to awaken this potentiality of speech, this potential of common experience of a spiritual world, slumbering in every list of words, as it is in the array of objects, and the deployment of prosaic activities. The poet must reunite words and things, give things the names that express their

---

8 Ibid., p. 15.
9 Emerson, 'American Scholar', p. 68.
10 Ibid., p. 67.

and the temporal constraint of the poem. Poetry is alive as long as the world has not yet plundered its poeticsity, as long as thought has not yet separated the forms of self-knowledge from the world of images, and the rational administration of things from the immediacy of human relations. Faced with the prose of the rationalized world, ideal poetry is condemned to mime its own idea by playing with significations deprived of all substantial content.

The political and poetic nineteenth century may have been nothing but an incessant effort to deny the verb of simultaneously declaring that the long history of poetic forms and the short history of modern revolutionary turmoil were over. Denying this Hegelian verdict means refusing the idea it proposes of the modern world: the idea of a time when thought is finally the conscious contemporary of its world. Our world is not contemporary to its thought: this is the counter-verdict of those who want to confer the task of a necessary revolution on the gathered masses or on the solitary poet. Whoever wants to give a meaning to the word modernity must take this into account: modernism – artistic and political – is not the blissful affirmation of the greatness of work, electricity, cement and speed. It is first of all a counter-affirmation about modernity: it denies that the contemporary world has its own thought and that contemporary thought has its world. In fact, this counter-affirmation contains two theses. The first one is a thesis of separation: the contemporary world is structured by a separation that must be abolished. Here the subjective richness of assembled humanity remains foreign to humans, frozen in dogmas of revealed religion, the mechanics of state administration or the product of work appropriated by capital; the signs of the future are still ciphered there in the fossils of past revolutions or barbarous hieroglyphics of industrial and colonizing innovation. The revolution to come is the conscious reappropriation of this subjective richness fixed in the objective world and the deciphering of these enigmatic signs. ‘This is a confession, nothing more’, the young Marx wrote to Ruge in a September 1843 letter that fixes the programme of revolutionary modernity at the same time as that of the Franco-German Annals. He certainly ignored and would probably always ignore that in the previous year, on the other side of the Atlantic, another student of post-Kantian idealism had fixed the task of the new poet in the same terms:

For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labour, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression ... For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.  

The separation thesis thus doubles as a thesis of non-contemporaneity: the modern world is characterized by a gap between temporarilities. It was the young Marx again who determined its political formula in 1843 Germany: the revolution to come finds both its premonition and its task in a double absence of contemporaneity. German philosophy elaborated a theory of human liberation which was already beyond the French political revolution but which did not have – whatever academic Hegelians may say – any correlate in the miserable, feudal and bureaucratic reality of contemporary Germany. The German revolution would thus be able to skip over the French step of political revolutions in order to become a human revolution directly. But it would only be able to do so on one condition: namely, that it would appropriate this energy of the active transformation of the world that the French revolutionary fighters were once able and could still deploy without being able to give it any theoretical formulation at the level of the age and of their action.

By contrast, the Emersonian revolution does not propose any collective emancipation. It entrusts exemplary individuals with the task of giving the meaning and enjoyment of spiritual and sensible wealth to a community. The poet ‘stands among partial men for the complete man’; he is the one to reattach words to things, and thus inform his contemporaries of a common wealth, that of the universal soul which exteriorizes itself in the material world. But he informs them precisely of their own common wealth, not of his own wealth, nor of his personal artistic talent. His power of naming things is ‘the power of resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms, and accompanying that’. He is a complete man only by his capacity to attach each particular sensible form and each word of language to the breath of the whole. And he draws this power only from his ability to nourish himself

14 Ibid., pp. 4–7.
15 Ibid., p. 4.
16 Ibid., p. 15.
with the potential latent in collective experience, to read the hieroglyphics inscribed in the savage and multiform nature of the new continent, but also in the features and gestures of hybrid multitudes that explore and reclaim it. The America of happy lumberjacks and fierce conquerors of virgin lands, where a disparate crowd was summoned not long ago to verbal jousting over these common affairs – which the Founding Fathers had wanted to entrust to enlightened landowners – and where the free spirits of the Bostonian gentry came across slaves fleeing Southern plantations, this land of chaos and contrast indeed offers an image of modernity entirely opposed to the modernity of the Prussian administration defined by Berlin philosophy. Here, more than elsewhere, the contemporary affirms itself as a shock between heterogeneous temporalities, and as a radical gap between spirituality in search of a body and material effervescence in search of thought. Here, more than elsewhere, the task of the new poet can once again find, over the ashes of academic Hellenism, the concrete potency of Homeric poetry, which simultaneously expresses the savage anger of Achilles, the man of war, and the multiplicity of activities represented on his shield. Finally, here more than elsewhere, the task of the poet can be identified with the construction of a community in possession of its own meaning.

The new poet, the modern poet, is the one who can express the spiritual substance present in the barbarity of America in gestation; to express this common spiritual potential is to manifest the symbolic nature of all material reality, as well as any prosaic naming. The symbol is not the figurative expression of abstract thought. It is the fragment detached from the whole that carries the potential of the whole, that bears it on the condition that one draw it out of its solitude as a material thing, that one link it to other fragments and that one circulate air – which is the breath of the whole – in between these fragments. Poetry to come could thus be characterized by two seemingly contradictory concepts: one could call it idealist, for it strives to define the spiritual potential hidden in the diversity of things and material activities. One could call it materialist, for it does not concede any world of its own to spirituality – it recognizes it only as the link that unites sensible forms and activities. One could even give it apparently antagonistic names. One could call it symbolist, for in the table of sensible things, it only shows a

copy of a text written in ‘the alphabet of the stars’. One could call it unannalist, for it makes clear that something is poetic only if it is attached to the living totality that it expresses. No doubt, the two adjectives express poetic differences. Symbolist poetics singularizes a third element that lends its potency to a series of assembled forms: a ‘third, fusible aspect’ that suggests, for Mallarmé, ‘the exact relation between images’; a ‘third character’, representing the world of the soul, whose presence Maeterlinck underlines in the banal dialogue of certain characters in Ibsen who seem ‘to talk about rain and good weather in a dead man’s room’. Unanimist poetics, on the contrary, entrusts the multiplicity of words and assembled forms along with the potential to represent its own infinity. But both one and the other, from the time of Mallarmé to Dziga Vertov, would often mix their forms and their effects for two reasons. First of all, symbolist poetics is an egalitarian poetics: it gives everything and every material relation the power to symbolize what the poetic tradition limited to a few privileged relations. Secondly, both rely on the same idea of poetic capacity – that is, the power to ‘explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact’, and to find in every sensible form the supersensible potential, the potential for infinization, which carries it beyond itself. This beyond can be the endless ‘procession’ of beings equally carried away in the same movement; it can be the ‘third fusible aspect’ which detach itself from the relation of elements. But in both cases, the material object is torn from the limits of egotistical usage, made into the bearer of a common potential that is its emblem: the emblem of a community possessing the spirit of its material life or the sensible materiality of its idea. The poem makes everything into more than a thing, but it does so insofar as it is itself more than art – another economy, another circulation established between subjects, words, and things.

This complicity between symbolist spirituality and unanimesthether democratic or communist—had been given its formula by an attentive reader of Emerson. Its inventor was Walt Whitman, whose Leaves of Grass was hailed in 1855, in a letter from Emerson, as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed."

We know that Emerson's friends and the Bostonian intelligentsia were moved by the support given by such a distinguished mind to a work whose vulgarity and "trithymalactic audacity" insulted 'what is most sacred and decent among men', and that Emerson himself did not much appreciate seeing his letter used to promote the second edition. But this rerouting of a thank you note is itself only small change in a much more radical transaction. The work itself seems to have been conceived as the exact response to the philosopher's call, as an exact embodiment of the program sketched out by the propositions of the 1841 Boston lecture, by someone who had only been an inoffensive New York journalist until then: the programme of the new poet who would measure up to the immeasurable American people and territory, the new poet capable of expressing the living poem that they constitute. Whitman tells us he throws his 'barbaric yawn over the roofs of the world'. But this barbaric manifesto itself is only the extreme version, the deliberately 'barbarized' version of an idea of poetry elaborated by the best philosophical minds and the highest poetic spirits, from Schiller to Emerson, Schelling, Hegel, Coleridge, and a few others. Surely, even if the famous description of Achilles' shield serves as a distant model, no one had ever seen such an extravagant succession of prosaic activities and tools, this gallery of insignificant, vulgar or horrible genre scenes, offered up as a poetic work. Thus, in the first of the poems, the one that will become the Song of Myself: the farmer contemplating his oats, the lunatic carried to the asylum, the printer with gaunt jaws turning his quid of tobacco, the malformed limbs of a bloodied body tied to the anatomist's table, the removed parts falling off into a pail with a horrible sound, the quadroon girl


monetary estimations of the market: the value of equality that they get from all being microcosms of the whole, susceptible of being attached to the interminable chain of beings, to the inexhaustible life of the whole.

The ‘auctioneer’s catalogue’ is thus a counter-catalogue that annuls the difference between use and exchange value by returning each thing to its place. This place denies the ancient hierarchy of positions in which each person had to do ‘his own business’, to take each thing and each act in the great procession of irreducibly material and spiritual realities. The interminable display of vulgar objects and activities is the strict application of the spiritualist principle articulated by Emerson: the symbolic use of nature abolishes distinctions of low and high, honest and vile. Small and mean things serve as well as great symbols. The meeker the type by which a law is expressed, the more pungent it is, and the more lasting in the memories of men. And the same vertigo of common names of common things follows Emerson’s indication on the role of the poet as a giver of names, the suggestive value of ‘bare lists of words’ borrowed from a dictionary for ‘an imaginative and excited mind’, and the fact that ‘what would be base, or even obscene, to the obscene, becomes illustrious, spoken in a new connexion of thought’. The ‘catalogue’ is the linking, and it is the linking that redeems all ugliness and all vulgarity:

For, as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God, that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attracts things to nature and the Whole ... disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts. Readers of poetry see the factory-village, and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the bee-hive, or the spider’s geometrical web.

24 Emerson, ‘The Poet’, p. 11.
26 Emerson, ‘The Poet’, p. 11.

The infinite multiplication of activities, things and vulgar names is thus the accomplishment of a spiritual task of redemption.

The interminable inventory cannot be relegated to a materialist myopia glued to the immediacy of facts and objects. Nor can the triumphal affirmation of the one who sings himself be relegated to the naive egotism of a proud inhabitant of the new individualistic world. Above all, it is related to the vast redemption of the empirical world proclaimed by German idealism: the redemption of a sensible world where spirit recognizes the exterior form of a divine thought that it knows from now on as its own thought. The initial declaration of the collection expresses this primordial reversal, and not some silly uncouth Yankee arrogance: ‘I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume.’

The formula does not simply translate Emerson’s formula affirming that ‘All men have my blood, and I have all men.’ It puts to work, more profoundly, the Emersonian virtue of ‘self-reliance’, which is no self-infatuation but the knowledge that ‘there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works’.

Also, this self-affirmation goes along with the erasure of the poet’s proper name. No author’s name appears on the cover of the collection. The name ‘Walt Whitman’ appears only once in the body of the text – that is to say, at once in its centre and lost within its mass. It is qualified as ‘one of the roughs’ and ‘a kosmos’ – that is to say, as a microcosm of the community. Putting oneself at the centre of all things is to thereby affirm this universal intellectual capacity, which most people renounce practising. It is to undo the chains by which things are held in the utilitarian and monetary order and individuals held in the role that society expects of them. In an earlier version, the proud self-affirmation was found in a declaration of emancipation:

27 Whitman, Leaves of Grass, p. 51.
29 Ibid., p. 35.
I am your voice — It was tied in you — In me it begins to talk.
I celebrate myself to celebrate every man and woman alive;
I loosen the tongue that was tied in them,
It begins to talk out of my mouth. 30

The absolute immanence of the 'I' to all things is also the means of giving the nearest things the beauty and the marvellous character reserved until then for distant things. 31 It is the means for suppressing the very difference between close and far, for bringing the distant closer by rendering what is close infinite. This bringing closer is a matter of breath, of shared respiration. The poem establishes this community from the beginning by linking the emanations of all things to the poet's breathing, and the poem's words to the very breathing of the things it speaks about:

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread,
crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark colour'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loosing to the eddies of the wind,
A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms ... 32

In one of those anonymous articles where he celebrates his coming, the poet is not mistaken to award himself the praise of being the 'true spiritualist'. 33 The true spiritualist is the one who exactly identifies the manifestation of spirit in the respiration of bodies which takes all things into its cycle and thus delivers the truth — the becoming flesh and spirit — waiting there. He is the one who erases everything that could arrest this continual breath of spirit/respiration. This is why the collection bears its author's name only as a name uttered by the breath of the poem. This is why the name on the cover page is replaced by a full-length portrait: the portrait of a body well planted on its feet and depending on its instincts, able to exchange its health with the health of common things. One of the first commentators underlines the pertinence of this substitution as a transcendental principle: 'As seems very proper in a book of transcendental poetry, the author withholds his name from the title page, and presents his portrait, neatly engraved on steel, instead. This, no doubt, is upon the principle that the name is merely accidental; while the portrait affords an idea of the essential being from whom these utterances proceed.' 34 Following the same logic, the collection is named Leaves of Grass. The title not only affirms the poetic thesis that governs it: all things are equal because the most infinitesimal contains the universe: 'I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars.' 35 It incarnates this egalitarian procession in its very layout: the pages of a book must be considered like the detached leaves of any tree whatsoever, emanations of universal anonymous life. Before Mallarmé, Whitman asks the 'symbolist' question par excellence: How can the book be the sensible reality of its own idea? The 'pure' poet will not find a more subtle means than to imitate the starry sky through the arrangement of lines on the page. The rude Long Island native takes things more at the root: instead of asking printed paper to imitate the subject of the poem, he asks it simply to imitate the potential it expresses: the potential of the continual procession of material realities traversed by their spirit. Strictly speaking, this means the poem neither begins nor ends. The pages of the preface are presented in columns, imitating the layout of daily newspapers. And the preface is not announced as such but starts as the continuation of a speech that has always already begun. If the first letter is capitalized, it is uniquely because it belongs to the proper name that this poem expresses, and that is expressed within it: America. The collection of poems, for one, does not include any division. At most, the time of a deeper breath separates the twelve poems — of extremely varying length, and none

31 Emerson, 'American Scholar', p. 68.
32 Whitman, Leaves of Grass, p. 51.
of which has a title – from one another. In a single continuous flow of sixty pages, the first poem emits what the future Song of Myself would distribute into fifty-two sections. And above all the poet invented an unprecedented verbal form for the great procession of common things and beings. It would be called the 'prose poem', and its predecessors were sought here and there: in America, in the morals of the popular Proverbial Philosophy by Martin Farquhar Tupper; in France, in the pictorial evocations of Aloysius Bertrand, a supposed precursor of Baudelaire. After Baudelaire, poetized prose expressed the sinuous twists and turns of the big city, and the poetry at work in the prosaic world. But what Whitman invents, for America, is more radical than the flexibility of the serpentine line, dear to the English. As he deploys it, the 'prose poem' is a mode of written speech that refutes the dilemma the philosophy teacher poses to Monsieur Jourdain. Like Molière's stubborn fabric salesman, the poet of plebeian America wants neither 'verse nor prose': neither the account book that maintains things in their commodity value, nor the poetic speech that separates its chosen subjects and rhythms from commonplace occupations. The modernist axiom – at the time it still carries the unwieldy name, 'transcendentalist' – can be summed up here: there is a mode of presenting common things that subtracts them both from the logic of the economic and social order and from the artificiality of poetic exception. In order to guarantee material reality, Whitman breaks both the conventional closure of verse and the continuity ('universal reportage') of ordinary prose. He invents an unprecedented punctuation: these ellipses that the first paragraph of the 'preface' spectacularly imposes and that the poems will continue. The ellipses are the practical punctuation of this 'neither ... nor', this 'neither verse nor prose' that claims to express the spiritual truth of things, their belonging to the whole manifested by their ability to create links. This is a suspended linkage: these ellipses disunite the micro-events of ordinary life in order to reunite them in the continuity of the living poem. They are the visible figure of the Idea, the figure of Infinity that reunites by disuniting all vulgar things in its interior.

The ellipses would disappear in later editions that gave the poems titles and organized them into sections. They nonetheless remain one of the first and most significant attempts at writing and visualizing the poem of 'modern life'. For Whitman's novelty effectively inaugurates a double legacy: the new poem is the poem brought nearer to life in two ways. On the one hand, it is the interiorized poem: the description of the world's spectacles is repeated in the movement of speech, the movement of speech brought back from the letter towards its living spirit, towards the breath from which it comes. But on the other hand, it is spirit outside itself, made visible in the new arrangement of the page. On the one hand, Whitman's 'free verse' could serve as a model for the symbolist search for rhythm subtracted from the material constraints of traditional verse, apt at expressing the ideality of poetic emotion. Symbolist poets – Viélé-Griffin in France, Balmont in Russia – were among the ranks of Whitman's introducers. But it was the naturalist or unanimalist reaction that set the excessively pale symbolist idealities against the poet of flesh, large cities, and teeming life. Later the propagandists of young Soviet Russia widely distributed Korney Chukovsky's translation, to the point of making fliers from it in order to boost the morale of the soldiers of the Russian army and the workers of the industrial reconstruction.36 But next to these poems transformed into propaganda tracts for combatants, there was the edition published in 1923 in Petrograd, with its futurist cover on which the Cyrillic letters making up Walt Whitman's name danced before a background of sky-scrappers, between the stars of the American flag and the accordion folds of the red flag. The spiritual and materialist poem of modern life is also the poem that abolishes the separation between the signs of speech and graphic images. Hence the Whitmanian legacy, surely an unexpected legacy for Emerson, is not limited to verses adopted by poets in Claudel's time; it can also be found in the paintings, drawings or posters by cubists and futurists, which mix linguistic signs with the outlines of forms to identify them either with the painting of the modern city or with the impulse towards the future of the workers' homeland. This explains why, more than once, the frenetic rhythms of Whitmanian lyricism would contaminate the rigorous constructions of the Soviet avant-garde directors who were working to make cinema the language of the dialectic. Dziga Vertov could accuse Eisenstein of misappropriating montage from the Kino-eye to restore bourgeois

narrative cinema. In turn, Eisenstein could denounce the accumulative, non-dialectical character of Vertovian montage. But one thing is certain: the montage of *Man with a Movie Camera* which sweeps up the manicurist's gestures, magicians' tricks and miners' labour in the same accelerated rhythm owes more to *A Song of Occupations* or to the *Song of the Broad Axe*, than to *Capital*. And the dialectic of *The General Line* receives its demonstrative force only in the torrents of milk or the frenzy of reapers carried away by the Whitmanian rhythm. The production revolution is expressed in the forms of the new poem only if it momentarily forgets the distance separating the revolutionary editorialist of the *Franco-German Annals* from the transcendentalist lecturer of Boston.

5. The Gymnasts of the Impossible

*Paris, 1879*

Dear reader, savor this book, without losing a single syllable, for it will teach you about the most interesting people that the century has produced; these admirable mimes and gymnasts, the Hanlon Lees who, while everybody bends towards the ground, saying that crawling is good, do not consent to crawl and instead fly towards the azure, towards infinity, towards the stars! They thus console us and redeem us from vile resignation and universal platitude. They do not speak – no just Gods! – due to a lack of thought, but they know that outside daily life, speech must be used only to express heroic and divine things. Admirable mimes, I have said, yes, even after Debureau and even in the country that produced Debureau, because like him they have mobile faces, the rapid idea that transfigures them, the flash of the gaze and the smile, the mute voice that knows how to say it all, and, more than that, they have this agility that enables them to fuse desire and action in one single movement, which frees them from ignoble gravity. Like Jean Gaspard, they have a comedian's face, but it might not be that way; in fact, just as Debureau's grimace gave the impression and the illusion of agility, they too could give the illusion of thought by the rapidity and the rhythmic precision of their movements.

I love them with the strictest bias, because they are entirely allies and accomplices of the poet, and because they pursue the same goal as the poet himself. Originally the human being was triple; he contained three beings within himself: a man, a beast, and a god. To the sociability that made man, he added instinct, running, naive grace, innocence, sharp and perfect senses, the joyful leap, the surety of