

Devane Lecture Discussion – 1-18-04

TK David, I thought one way we might start this afternoon is with me inviting you to expand a bit on the significance of the title that you chose for Tuesday's lecture. You talked about Whitman and Lincoln and drew our attention to some important respects in which they are alike in their commitments and convictions and their democratic faith. But you described them in the title as representative Americans and I wonder what you mean by that—representative of us, still? In what ways? How so?

DB Well, we know the title is what Whitman calls "a cheat," "a sell," "a lure," and I tried, in a way, to disclaim too much importance being given to the title at the start of the lecture, just by saying that people who come to seem representative generally are those who, in their own time, are exceptional. But not to be too withholding about it, the mid-nineteenth century is a great age of thinkers in that ethically very self-conscious, late romantic or second romantic generation, the generation of Carlyle and Emerson. They were lecturing to audiences much like this and, I imagine, much the size of this one and in much the kind of place that this lecture is being held, on themes about the hero, by which they mean something we'd now call "the culture hero," not the hero of a certain ethnic group. The hero comes to stand for quite a lot of people who share an experience of life, who share a way of life. Carlyle has a, at one time, very influential book—everybody going to a university like Yale, say 80 years ago, would have read it some time or other—called Heroes and Hero Worship and Emerson, almost in the same period, in the 1850s, I believe, brought out his book of lectures called Representative Men. His representative men are various. Shakespeare is one. Napoleon is another. He seems to have his mind more on those who originated some impulse among humankind through leadership and politics or through imaginative invention than on military leaders or conquerors. Napoleon is in there almost *pro forma*. You couldn't talk about great men, good and bad, without mentioning him in the 19th century.

I wanted to suggest in the lecture, delicately—not with a bludgeon—that Whitman's discovery of certain impulses, instincts, powers of saying "no," and of embracing the texture of the life around one and saying, "yes"—that these belong to Americans peculiarly and in a characteristic way, that they are part of a democratic life that has yet to be described. And that is the great task he is performing—performance is a lot of what is going on in "Song of Myself." It is why it's such a hyperbolic poem. It is why it's such an exclamatory poem. It is why it's such a self-centered poem and yet the self seems to resemble a lot of things we know in ourselves, though none of us is apt to agree with all of its account of experience. But that, by celebrating himself and something more than himself, he is performing a kind of experiencing, singing of an experience that is in us but that we don't yet know or can't yet recognize in us. Not so different, maybe, from what Socrates wanted to do for the few in his circle of philosophical discussion but now it's done for a great many, for people whose articulateness is much more humble from the first. And that he is, in that sense, representing something about America that has yet to find a voice.

Lincoln, I take it, is representative, in some ways, in a much more conventional sense. He is the political leader as representative of the will of the people in the way that great Republican parliamentarians of the 18th and early 19th century had described such a leader. In the reading for the Devane Lectures pamphlet—those of you who are taking it as a class—is a short, very famous speech by Edmund Burke of 1774 on the duties of a representative. And a representative is not to follow, is not to tread the path of mandates. The representative is to use his conscience and his knowledge which may, in some cases and in some ways, be beyond those of the people, and yet there is a reciprocal response between the representative and the people. The people can vote him out of office. So that Lincoln, in this sense, as—if you'll grant the phrase—a genius of politics, is answerable to his constituency, answerable to his audience who, in some cases are his readers, too. Many of his speeches are published, open letters, like the one to Conklin, are published in his lifetime and are an important part of his campaign for the principles he cares about. But though more intimately answerable, though his power can be withdrawn from him because it's more palpable than that of a poet, nevertheless, he stands for something about the

people that they would have a leader stand for. So there is a more pragmatic, fixable representation—representation with a trace in the case of the politician. But that both of them aspire to do something both typical and outstanding—standing out from the gregarious mass. In that sense, egregiously.

TK But there's something, it seems to me, both quite American and very un-American in Whitman's universal enthusiasm for everything under the sun. There's nothing—it seems, reading the poem—that crosses his path that he isn't in love with or that he doesn't wish to fall in love with. Every human being that he bumps into or hears about or reads about is, for Whitman, an object not just of fascination and curiosity, but of very deep affection, of reverential affection, and he invites the reader into that affection. This is a wonderful, exuberant, erotic enthusiasm for human life in all of its variety and manifoldness. And there is something American in that attitude, a kind of super cheerful neighborliness that goes beyond just helping out, and really wanting to enjoy and appreciate every aspect of the human scene. But, at the same time, it's exhausting—just plain exhausting. Exhausting for the reader—the poem is exhausting. I think my sympathies were tapped out by the time I came to the end of it and it made me feel another, I think, typically American sensation which was just wanting to be left alone and not taxed with the burden of having to be sympathetic to anyone—just me, my house, my family, my possessions. I will follow the laws and be a good citizen, but don't ask more of me than that.

DB Don't ask more of you, even in a poem???? But the other thing to say is that Whitman anticipates your reaction, has that reaction of disgust almost at the omnivorous-ness of his erotic embrace of life in the poem. There are those moments like the one where he says, "Stop, stand back. Somehow I have been stunned. I discover myself on the verge of the usual mistake." And the "usual mistake" is to be identifying with everything. It's true, the program of this song is celebration. I wrote down some lines that suggest that: "It is for the wicked, just as much as for the righteous. I make appointments with all." And he says, in the same vein, although less controversially, maybe: "I am the poet of the woman, the same as the man." But, though sometimes exhausted, sometimes standing back, there is the sense in him that what he's trying to convey of experience is so impalpable, actually so both physical in a way that doesn't open itself to articulation and ideal, that he can't do justice to it. All he wants to do is suggest the immensity and indeterminateness of what experience, what living, is like. There is a joke at his own expense on this theme. He is—presumably part of him feeling this Kronman-like reaction—saying, "I just want to stand back. Leave me alone. Let me be a good citizen." But then the other side of him says—when he's talking about speech being the twin of his vision but he's not quite getting it right yet, not even half way through the poem—"Walt, you have so much in you. Why don't you let it out?" "Speak up, young man," he says to himself. The sense there being, even at his most articulate and inventive, an inadequacy to something he would try to testify to. He does have the pretension of conducting something like a Quaker meeting in himself—all these voices are in himself. He's heard them but we're going to hear them. They're contradictory voices. But, you know, "I resist anything better than my own diversity," he says. If we find that true as an experience about our reactions to life in general, even in our occasional recoil against his appetite, his egotism, we feel he is with us there, too. I don't want to say, you know, to object to this poem, not to go along with it. To end up saying, "This isn't quite for me," is somehow to be less than you should be, less than Whitman is.

But it is surprising, the experience of reading and re-reading the poem, how different readers find themselves encouraged by different parts of it and that draws them to go back and then they find that more of it answers to them than they believed at first. And there's a moral question behind your aesthetic demur about this all-embracing-ness of the poem. If you include everything, if your appointments are with the wicked as well as the good, is there not something questionable? This is a poem all about life but that suggests maybe it can't be lived. And there, I think, one has to see it, above all, as a poem against the cloak of shame that covers up so much, and admitting what it is they care for in life. This is, at that time, a very conformist and a very religious country. When Whitman says, in "Democratic Vistas," he wants the self to be without encumbrances and without superstitions, he means without any institutional religion.

TK But there's a difference between inviting the reader to look through the conventional and taken for granted distinctions of good and evil which are misleading, oppressive and dangerous. There's a difference between inviting the reader to do that on the one hand and inviting the reader to abandon completely the moral yardstick of judgment that we use in ordinary life, private and political, when we

make judgments of goodness and evil . And I can accept and appreciate and even enjoy the invitation to suspend that distinction between good and evil in a poetic moment, or moment of poetic experience, reading the poem. But it's not an invitation that I should pick up and carry with me when I close the book and step out into political life where decisions have to be made that require the employment of that very distinction. Lincoln was a man of moral principle, so it appears—also, as you pointed out, an astute pragmatist and reader of circumstances—but a man of deep moral principle. Surely he would have resisted the spirit of “Song of Myself” as a—how should I put this?—as a mode of acting and thinking in public life.

DB Oh, in public life, as a guide to the customs of American political life, yes. This poem can't solve all problems for you and it is doubtful as equipment for living on all fronts. But I think that I would still want to say there is something consistent, however contradictory, about the representation it makes. Whitman wants to say about even the wicked, even the “venerealee,” as he names one example of those who may suffer from actions that are not worth admiring, that even when he's doing that, the poem affirms so much because it wants to reject those who reject. It wants to embrace because it is against those who are for eliminating part of experience in the name of a group of ancestors who lived a hundred years ago or ten thousand years ago. Remember in that section of the poem where he says, “I think I could turn and live a while with the animals.” One of the things he loves about the animals is that they do not kneel down to ancestors who lived hundreds of years ago. They are living just as they are. He shares, with the most radical Protestants who lived, not in Connecticut, but in Rhode Island and Massachusetts Bay Colony, the belief that, even in the wicked, there is a spot of conscience that is sacred and human. And he shares, with radical Christians and humanists of different kinds and in different times, the idea that it is right to embrace what is human, even in the criminal. But in this poem—look at the poem throughout—he praises, he admires, he enters into the being of and asks us to care for the hunted, not the hunter; the tender and kindly and sympathetic, not the cruel. So that the poem, to that extent, though it wants not to go along with the bigotry of moralism even one inch—certainly not as far as the Lyceum speech by Lincoln goes—he doesn't want you to put your hand on the book of the forefathers of the revolution and swear to obey the laws. No, Whitman is not asking that. But I think the poem, nevertheless, is to that degree pure, that the sense of the unholy that comes out of reading the poem is the reader's contribution and, in no way, Whitman's. So I show how much it has become my gospel by wanting to defend it to this length.