

THE SHAPING OF THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

IN 1867 Walt Whitman brought out a revision of *Leaves of Grass*. He was constantly revising; this was the fourth version. The first had been in 1855, the second in 1856, the third in 1860. Virtually all approved and respectable critics of the time who even bothered to consider Whitman were hostile; they believed a "poetry" that could be so recklessly revised to be obviously no poetry at all. Nowadays there are many who regard him as our greatest poet; when Lucien Price asked Alfred North Whitehead what, if anything, original and distinctively American this country has produced, the philosopher answered without hesitation, "Whitman." I suspect that Whitman, at this moment, is not so popular as he was thirty years ago; if I am right, then this is a sign of the times, one which I must consider ominous. But be that as it may, Whitman's successive revisions, Whitman being what he was, are apt to come not from a heightened sense of form or from a quest for more precise language, but simply out of his constantly changing sense of the American destiny. He could never make up his mind, though at each point he had to pretend that he did and so declaim with a finality whose very flamboyance betrays the uncertainty.

In 1856 he printed one of his most interesting songs, the one called in the collected works, "As I Sat Alone by Blue Ontario's Shore." In this version, and again in 1860, the poem is an exaltation of the role he assigned himself, the poet-prophet of democracy. But by 1867 he had lived through the central ordeal of this republic, the war we call variously "Civil" or "Between the States." Something profoundly disturbing had happened to Walt Whitman; it is expressed not only in poems written directly out of his experience, like "Drum-Taps" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," but in the revisions of previous utterances. In 1856 and 1860, for instance, one line of "By Blue Ontario's Shore" had read, "Give me to speak beautiful words! take all the rest." In 1867 this became "Give me to sing the song of the great Idea! take all the rest." After the war, he would celebrate the democracy itself, not merely the poet. These changes, commentators theorize, record a chastening of Whitman's egotism; they indicate his belated realization that this country is bigger than any man, even a Whitman, and from the realization he learned humility.

However, the sort of humility one acquires only from discovering that