

Whitman, Death, and Democracy

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ONE OF THE MOST striking moments in Plato's *Apology* is when Socrates declares, "To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know."¹ Fear of death is intellectually presumptuous; it implies that one knows for certain that death is bad. Yet as limited mortals, we cannot know the nature of death in its entirety, or what—if anything—comes afterward.

The corollary of Socrates' startling suggestion is that—by embodying intellectual humility—indifference toward death is wise. But this stance seems astonishingly bloodless. One of humanity's defining features is consciousness of mortality. Given the human animal's self-reflective nature, curiosity about death is understandable. Our penchant for wonder defies indifference toward death. Perhaps this is why, later in the *Apology*, Socrates ventures guesses as to what death is; death, he speculates, is either (1) reunion with "all who have died" or (2) "dreamless sleep."² In the end, however, Socrates recommitments himself to agnosticism about death: "I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god."³

Socrates' coolness in the face of death has a nineteenth-century American heir in the antebellum Walt Whitman.⁴ Given that Socrates' serenity about mortality left a long legacy in the Western philosophical tradition—helped along by Epicurus, Lucretius, Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius—that fact itself is unremarkable.⁵ What is remarkable, however, is the way Whitman revealed affinities between coolness in the face of death and the character dispositions and sensibilities most conducive to democ-

racy. Whitman articulated three visions of death in his antebellum work: the first and second sought to allay readers' mortal anxiety by intimating the self's material immortality; the third sought to encourage affirmation of death, even in the absence of spiritual or material immortality. All three were intended to promote affirmation of the self and the world as they are, and therefore rejection of the idea that the self and the world are fallen and need supernatural redemption. Affirmation of the self and the world as they are both signals and compounds the generosity of perception and spirit necessary for democratic culture, a culture wherein every individual regards every other individual as beautiful and sublime. While George Kateb, Morton Schoolman, and Jason Frank have helpfully elaborated this idea of democratic culture in Whitman,⁶ none has analyzed Whitman's tripartite poetics of death and explained their crucial role in Whitman's quest to inspire democratic culture. This essay takes up this task, in the hope it can enhance our appreciation of the radicalism of Whitman's democratic theory, a theory that not only acknowledges but also celebrates human finitude.

The First Vision: Organic Transformation

Whitman's best-known view of death is that of organic transformation. The axial imagery of "Song of Myself" (1855) is of corpses sinking into the ground and returning as grass:

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end
to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward . . . nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.⁷

Characterizing the grass as both "the beautiful uncut hair of graves" and "the produced babe of the vegetation,"⁸ Whitman illustrates how the bodies of the dead nourish new life. Human decomposition enriches the soil and gives rise to flora that then cycles through nature. The imagery on its own is neat, suggestive, and designed to console those anxious about death. But

everyone disintegrated" in an even stronger sense. The future is composed of current selves disintegrated, and if Lamarck is right, this endurance is both material and characterological. The lives we fashioned, according to Lamarck's theory, left distinctive marks on the body's atoms: material endurance is thus characterological endurance. Integrated characters live on in disintegrated atoms, which death throws into the future.

"Crossing" specifically notes the way our atoms unite past, present, and future: "The similitudes of the past and those of the future, / . . . / The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them." These lines then converge in an important message of solace to those anxious about mortality. Even as we face death, there is the consoling "certainty of others—the life, love, sight, hearing of others." Others' future existence guarantees our future existence. Just as past selves live in us, through atoms bearing their mark, we live on in future selves, through atoms bearing our mark.

Whitman's poetics of organic transformation suggest that there is no death, only change of form.¹⁸ Yet this vision does not overcome the problem of death, but rather evades it. The vision problematically suggests that, in death, there is no loss. This not only delegitimizes feelings of bereavement, but also defies some of the terms of the organic vision itself. Whitman's evocative poem "Full of Life Now" from the 1860 "Calamus" series sets out these terms in sharp relief:

Full of life, sweet-blooded, compact, visible,
I, forty years old the Eighty-third Year of The States,
To one a century hence, or any number of centuries hence,
To you, yet unborn, these, seeking you.

When you read these, I that was visible, am become invisible;
Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me,
Fancying how happy you were, if I could be with you, and become
your lover;

Be it as if I were with you. Be not too certain but I am now with you.¹⁹

On its plainest register of meaning, the first stanza records Whitman in 1859 writing a poem for posterity, while the second line envisions a reader "a century hence, or any number of centuries hence" reading the poem, and in so doing, "realizing" it. Whitman combines two key words—"compact" and

"visible"—to designate the poem's living subjects at their respective points in time, the writer writing in 1859 and the reader reading "a century hence, or any number of centuries hence." "Compact" and "visible" are Whitman's words for living, corporeally unified selves. The words, however, imply that death entails loss—specifically, the loss of compact (versus dispersed) corporeality, as well as visibility as a self. Adherents of Whitman's first vision of death might respond that this is not death but only change. But such a view attaches too little importance to our existence as corporeally unified individuals. Only through corporeal unity do we achieve self-consciousness and social visibility, and only through self-consciousness and social visibility do we experience subjectivity and recognition. The loss of corporeal unity entailed by death is therefore weighty, and cannot be consoled by the thought that our dispersed atoms live on in flora, fauna, and future selves.

Whitman's vision of death as organic transformation fails as consolation, and cannot by itself allay mortal anxiety. Yet Whitman's second vision of death—as inspiration to creative immortality—gives us a more satisfying vision of both material and subjective endurance: we live on not in the atoms we are, but in the work that we do.

The Second Vision: Inspiration to Creative Immortality

Even as it exposes the limitations of Whitman's first vision of death as organic transformation, "Full of Life Now" powerfully reveals Whitman's second vision of death: as inspiration to creative immortality. Recall the poem's first stanza:

Full of life, sweet-blooded, compact, visible,
I, forty years old the Eighty-third Year of The States,
To one a century hence, or any number of centuries hence,
To you, yet unborn, these, seeking you.

Earlier I argued that the words "compact, visible" in the stanza's first line refer to the poem's author as a corporeally unified self. When viewed in conjunction with the second stanza's second line—"Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me"—this meaning makes sense. But the first stanza's first line also reflexively refers to the poem itself: the "I" of the stanza is not just the voice of the *poet* in the past, but the voice of the

poem in the present. As a material artifact, the poem embodies the dead and disintegrated poet, and in so doing, revives and reintegrates him. Making the poet "compact" and visible," it also makes him immortal.

The poem acts as a vessel of immortality both in its material existence—embodying a corporeally disintegrated self in integrated form—and in its capacity to give voice to the poet each time the poem is read. The poem's first words—"Full of life, sweet-blooded, compact, visible"—suggest that whenever the reader starts reading the poem, she meets the poet in the fullness of his life. In the act of interpreting the poem, she engages in a transgenerational conversation that defies both time and death. The act of reading illustrates time's, space's, and therefore death's relativity; it shows, in the words of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," how "It avails not, neither time or place—distance avails not."²⁰

Whitman draws close analogies between bodies and written words elsewhere. In "A Song of the Rolling Earth" (1856), he writes:

Human bodies are words, myriads of words,
In the best poems re-appears the body, man's or woman's,
 well-shaped, natural, gay
Every part able, active, receptive, without shame or the need of
 shame.²¹

In written words, the self is literally present, whether or not the body that wrote the words is literally living and breathing. We are wherever we leave words behind, and through those words we figuratively live and breathe. Through written words, the self can defy the commonsensical notion that an individual can occupy only one point in space and time; through written words, the self can inhabit multiple points in space and outlast its bodily time. Furthermore, when those words are poetic—evocative and capacious in meaning—the self's revival is dynamic, "able, active, receptive," every time they are seriously read. The more "able, active, receptive" the reader, the more alive the writing, and hence the writer.²²

One place where Whitman takes the body/poem analogy quite far is the 1860 "Calamus" poem "Scented Herbage of My Breast":

Scented herbage of my breast,
Leaves from you I yield, I write, to be perused best afterwards,

Tomb-leaves, body-leaves, growing up above me, above death,
Perennial roots, tall leaves—O the winter shall not freeze you,
 delicate leaves,
Every year shall you bloom again—Out from where you retired, you
 shall emerge again²³

The axis of the poem is a threefold analogy between chest hair, leaves of grass, and pages of poetry. The poem's first line wonderfully evokes human body odor, especially given that all three editions of *Leaves of Grass* published up to this date (1855, 1856, and 1860) contained frontispieces with vivid portraits of the bearded Whitman. The famous 1855 and 1856 frontispiece even gives the reader a faint glimpse of Whitman's chest hair. The lesser known 1860 frontispiece does not provide this glimpse, but Whitman's beard and hair are fuller, making it easy for consumers of this edition to envision the "scented herbage" of the poet's breast (see pages 340–41).

"Scented Herbage of My Breast" also evokes the death-laden vegetative imagery of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman makes this reference explicit when he refers to the "scented herbage" as "Tomb-leaves, body-leaves, growing up above me, above death." As in "Song of Myself," the I's decomposed body gives rise to grass, to "beautiful uncut hair of graves."²⁴ At the same time, by so strongly overlapping the imagery of grass with the imagery of chest hair, "Scented Herbage" sharpens the suggestion from "Song of Myself" that the grass grows from "the breasts of young men."²⁵

"Scented Herbage of My Breast" refers, finally, to pages of poetry. The earliest edition of *Leaves of Grass* of course drew strong parallels between the bodies of women, men, and land, on the one hand, and bodies of poetry, on the other. But "Scented Herbage" deepens these parallels and makes them even more vivid. Aside from his insistence that "Leaves from you I yield, I write, to be perused best afterwards," Whitman's metaphor of scented herbage emphasizes the materiality of written words and printed poetry and their capacity for material endurance long after the body dies. The metaphor of *scented* herbage also provokes the thought that the pages of books have their own scent; old letters and manuscripts by deceased persons sometimes bear those persons' odor. Whitman reaffirms the idea that handwriting and printed pages have their own sinell when he writes, "O I do not know whether many, passing by, will discover you, or inhale your

faint odor—but I believe a few will.”²⁶ This vibrant materiality²⁷ of written words and pages, whose potential to activate the senses of not only sight and touch, but also smell, makes the corporeally absent physically present. In so doing, it brings the dead back to life. No wonder then that “Scented Herbage of My Breast” converges in a tribute to death, and to the strange way death enables new forms of presence:²⁸

Death is beautiful from you—(what indeed is beautiful, except
Death and Love?)
O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my chant of lovers—I
think it must be for Death,

.....
Through me shall the words be said to make death exhilarating²⁹

The central claim is that death is beautiful when poeticized: “Death is beautiful from you,” from, that is, the “scented herbage of my breast.” While in one sense Whitman is saying that death is always beautiful—for insofar as we find the grass beautiful, we find death beautiful—in another sense Whitman is saying that death is beautiful only insofar as we poeticize it. The idea that grass represents death, after all, is essentially poetic: though an argument can be made that the idea is also naturalistic, it is crucial to remember that the idea of nature is also poetic, for it represents an infinitely variegated phenomenon as an elegant and simple whole. This type of representation is better described as poetic than as scientific or philosophical. Insofar as science and philosophy reduce infinitely complex phenomena to simple and elegant units of representation, they are also forms of poetry.

Whitman’s line “O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my chant of lovers, I think it must be for death” brings us back to the essence of Whitman’s second vision of death. Death is not, in the first instance, immortal poetry; rather, death is *inspiration* for immortal poetry. Consciousness of our mortality inspires us to make memorable words out of our experience, so that we may live and converse with future generations. Poetry, in this sense, exists for those who come after us. Poetry lets future generations know the depth of our experience, and by informing them of our existence, gives them perspective on time’s breadth. Poetry helps future generations realize that others before them experienced feelings of sublimity; this then helps them appreciate their own chance to experience sublimity.

But poetry exists also for us. Poetry—and all creative work which takes enduring material form—allays mortal anxiety by giving us hope that we may still be present in the world even after we are absent. Whitman’s own work illustrates the striking results that can flow from frank acknowledgment of mortality combined with desire for immortality:

Give me your tone therefore, O Death, that I may accord with it,
Give me yourself—for I see that you belong to me now above all, and
are folded together above all—you Love and Death are,
Nor will I allow you to balk me any more with what I was calling life,
For now it is conveyed to me that you are the purports essential,

.....
That may be you are what it is all for—but it does not last so very long,
But you will last very long.³⁰

Whitman allays his mortal anxiety by creating a poetics of death, by subduing death to his form, so that death “belongs” to him before he “belongs” to it. Yet Whitman poetically masters death, paradoxically, by surrendering to it, by conceding its finality, that it lasts “very long.” At the same time, Whitman enigmatically suggests that death may be “what it is all for.” This claim that death is the aim of life is in one sense obvious: our bodies decay; every moment of our living is also a moment of our dying. The claim that death is “what it is all for,” however, also hearkens back to the more complex view of the ancients that life is preparation for death, and that the task of philosophy is learning how to die.³¹ The irony of saying that philosophy’s task is learning how to die points to the dictum’s true meaning—that philosophy’s task is learning how to live, specifically how to live in the knowledge of mortality. Whitman intimates an answer to this task when he declares that love and death “are folded together.”

Death intensifies our love for both people and the world around us by making us conscious of the fleetingness of our experience. Death compounds love by making lovers realize that time for love is limited. Death thus serves life. Viewed from one angle, death could inspire resentment of our condition by making us view it as one essentially of loss. Yet viewed from Whitman’s angle, death should inspire infinite love, for it reveals our condition as one of infinite gain. Death reveals that we have something instead of nothing, though it easily could be otherwise; death helps us see

that existence is a happy accident, for which we should be infinitely grateful.³² Whitman answers the riddle of death by ordering us to give ourselves over to a love coextensive with wonder at and gratitude for existence.³³ Yet this lesson ventures beyond Whitman's second vision of death, as inspiration to creative immortality, into the third, as a condition that makes us human.

Whitman's second vision of death commands us to create so that we may be immortal. Transform the world with your minds and hands, the second vision orders, while you still have time. Leave your mark on the visible world, so that future others may know that you were here, and that the world as it appears to them could not exist without you. We leave our immortal signature, Whitman's second vision says, not on our invisible atoms, but on our visible environment. The transcendence of death lies in world-building.

Whitman's second vision of death is more satisfying than his first vision, for it offers a path to immortality more worldly than organic endurance. But the second vision is far more heroic than democratic. This is not to say that democracy and heroism are incompatible. Democracy inspires its own distinctive forms of heroism, realized through "self-trust."³⁴ Yet truthfully speaking, only a few of any given generation will achieve creative immortality. No matter how creative democracy makes its citizens, some will always shine more brightly, and thus be more likely to live on in human memory. Furthermore, some works of genius will go unrecognized; creative virtuosity does not guarantee creative immortality. Creative immortality is a result of not just skill, but luck. Which great works don't get destroyed? Which great works find sympathetic readers and powerful interpreters? Because human memory is not completely meritocratic, Whitman's second vision of death as inspiration to creative immortality is not completely consoling. In extremely hopeful moments, the second vision may allay mortal anxiety, but when sobriety returns, it is for most people inadequate. So how should democrats console themselves in the face of mortality?

Whitman's third vision of death suggests that the promise of immortality is unnecessary for consolation. Even if death is a full stop, it still deserves our affirmation. Affirming death in the confidence that it is a full stop is essential to affirming ourselves and our world as they are and to transcending Puritan superstition, and thus to achieving the ecstatic gratitude for being born of democratic perspective.³⁵

The Third Vision: A Human Condition

The third way Whitman views death is as a human condition. It is a human condition, first, in a weak sense: death is an inescapable and undeniable part of human life; no human life—no plant or animal life, for that matter—evades it. Death is a human condition, second, in a strong sense: it is a *precondition* of humanity. Death is the outer limit of humanity: if we were deathless, we would be superhuman. Some may find super-humanity desirable. Whitman, however, counsels against this desire. He encourages us to see our humanity—a humanity we too often see as deficient and imperfect—as sufficient and perfect. By choosing to see our mortal condition as sufficient and perfect, we free ourselves from mortal anxiety and from what Emerson calls the "false prayers" of regret.³⁶

Whitman intimates this view of death most evocatively in "Who Learns My Lesson Complete?" (1855):

Who learns my lesson complete?

It is no lesson . . . it lets down the bars to a good lesson,
 And that to another . . . and every one to another still.³⁷

Whitman's insistence that his "lesson complete" is "no lesson," but "lets down the bars to a good lesson, / And that to another . . . and every one to another still," indicates that the "lesson complete" lacks positivity but still unlocks positive lessons. What might such a lesson be?

The great laws take and effuse without argument,
 I am of the same style, for I am their friend.
 I love them quits and quits . . . I do not halt and make salaams.³⁸

When Whitman writes that "The great laws take and effuse without argument," he suggests that the laws of the universe—including its cycle of birth and death—do not explain themselves completely. Our expectation that we should be able to understand these laws completely is therefore misplaced. Because one of the defining features of the universe is its mystery, quests for a complete metaphysics are futile.³⁹

Whitman then encourages his reader to befriend the universe in its lack of complete intelligibility. When he says, "I am of the same style, for I am their friend / I love them quits and quits . . . I do not halt and make salaams," he implies that it is possible to love the universe without grasping its metaphysics. He urges us, furthermore, to love the universe as an equal. Not even the universe merits our *abject* worship, for the self is itself a universe.

Yet even as it registers the sometimes frustrating mystery of the universe, "Who Learns My Lesson Complete" portrays it as astonishingly wonderful, notwithstanding its resistance to intellectual mastery:

It is no little matter, this round and delicious globe, moving so exactly
in its orbit forever and ever, without one jolt or the untruth of a
single second;
I do not think it was made in six days, nor in ten thousand years, nor
ten decillions of years,
Nor planned and built one thing after another, as an architect plans
and builds a house.⁴⁰

Feeling an acute sense of awe in the face of the universe's physics, Whitman becomes more and more atheistic about the universe's metaphysics. He rejects not only the orthodox Judeo-Christian belief that the earth was made in six days, but the idea that it was made at all.

Yet Whitman's "lesson complete" is not atheism, but rather a sober and responsible agnosticism—an agnosticism that acknowledges that the universe exceeds even our most expansive reflective capacities. Our response to the universe's sublimity should not be the ascription to it of a supremely intelligent design. Our response, rather, should be respect for its sublimity through refusal to enclose it in an all-subsuming metaphysics or theology—a metaphysics or theology that breeds intellectual and spiritual self-satisfaction and smother's openness and wonder. "Song of Myself" anticipates Whitman's "lesson complete":

And I call to mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I, who am curious about each, am not curious about God,
No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and
about death.

I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand God not in
the least,
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.⁴¹

It seems strange for a poet of openness and wonder to urge us to "Be not curious about God." It also seems strange for a poet who claims he is "not curious about God" to then say that he hears and beholds "God in every object." Whitman's rhetorical strategy here is not to deny the possibility of God, but to democratize our awe and wonder by redirecting them away from a divine author who may or may not exist to the self and the world that—if our senses are to be believed—certainly do exist:

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each
moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the
glass⁴²

"Beholding God in every object," Whitman appears to preach pantheism. But since pantheism constitutes an understanding of God, and Whitman insists that he understands "God not in the least," agnosticism remains Whitman's overriding commitment.⁴³ With or without God, the self and the world are worthy of reverence; Whitman finds their sheer existence miraculous. Whitman wants us to linger with our wonder, awe, and gratitude over "the sheer fact of existence,"⁴⁴ and not rush from the experience of sublimity to the dubious, parochial, and anthropomorphic project of ascribing to existence a reason and author.⁴⁵ The universe may be uncaused and self-existent in the same way we imagine God as uncaused and self-existent. Why hastily insist that the universe must have a maker, and narcissistically envision that maker in our own image?

Whitman's serene agnosticism about God produces serene agnosticism about death. "Who Learns My Lesson Complete?" promotes agnosticism about death not by preaching it didactically, but by (1) promising immortality in order to allay mortal anxiety and relax the reader enough to open him or her to alternative possibilities,⁴⁶ and (2) working to adjust downwardly the reader's sense of immortality's importance, so as to loosen the hold of

the desire for immortality and emancipate energy for a more intense and loving engagement of life. First is the promise of immortality.

I do not think seventy years is the time of a man or woman,
Nor that seventy millions of years is the time of a man or woman,
Nor that years will ever stop the existence of me or any one else.⁴⁷

On its plainest register of meaning, the stanza assures the reader that the self is not ultimately hostage to the body's decay over time. The stanza even hints that the self lives above and beyond time: years will not stop the existence of any given self. Several ambiguities, however, point to a second register of meaning that does not so much promise immortality as note the ways the human condition compensates us infinitely for our mortality. To say that one does not think that "seventy years" or "seventy millions of years" is "the time of a man or a woman" or that "years will ever stop the existence" of any given self is in one sense to say that the self is either immortal or eternal: either the self ends when time ends or the self lives beyond time. But in another sense, it is to say that measurable expanses of time are not where life is lived. Life, rather, is lived in moments—when the sense of time dissipates and a minute might as well be an hour or an hour a minute. The measure of life is not time but exhilaration. So when Whitman says, "I do not think seventy years is the time of a man or woman, / Nor that seventy millions of years is the time of a man or woman," he is in a sense saying that the time of a man or a woman is not any measurable quantity of time, but is rather the moment of lived intensity. The time of a man or woman is always now. In light of this reading, a new meaning emerges for Whitman's insistence that years will never "stop the existence of me": Whitman will not allow consciousness of time or mortality to detract from the sublimity he feels in moments of intense awareness or experience. Time and mortality will not stop him from giving himself completely to life.

Whitman then turns to the project of putting the value of immortality in perspective.

Is it wonderful that I should be immortal, as every one is immortal;
I know it is wonderful . . . but my eyesight is equally wonderful /
. . . and how I was conceived in my mother's womb is equally
wonderful,

And how I was not palpable once but am now . . . and was born on
the last day of May 1819 . . . and passed from a babe in the
creeping trance of three summers and three winters to articulate
and walk . . . are all equally wonderful.
And that I grew six feet high . . . and that I have become a man
thirty-six years old in 1855 . . . and that I am here anyhow—are
all equally wonderful;
And that my soul embraces you this hour, and we affect each other
without ever seeing each other, and never perhaps to see each
other, is every bit as wonderful:
And that I can think such thoughts as these is just as wonderful,
And that I can remind you, and you think them and know them to be
true is just as wonderful.⁴⁸

Whitman here concedes the fact of immortality without promulgating any particular vision of immortality. Though elsewhere he offers naturalistic and poetic visions of immortality as substitutes for the Christian idea of immortality, here he lets his reader hold on to whatever vision of immortality he or she prefers. After having assured the reader of immortality and thus relaxed the reader into a state of intellectual and spiritual openness, he gently but systematically devalues immortality by placing it on an equal evaluative footing with eyesight, conception, birth, growth, speech, movement, literature, materiality, thought, reading, and intuition. All of these are miracles and objects worthy of wonder, Whitman implies, just as we conventionally regard immortality as a miracle and object worthy of wonder. The cumulative effect of this poetic reevaluation is to allow the reader to affirm mortal life in the absence of immortality—for if eyesight, conception, birth, growth, speech, movement, literature, materiality, thought, reading, and intuition are just as wonderful as immortality, then the subtraction of immortality from the human condition is no great loss, for these other miraculous features of mortal existence remain, and more than compensate for our lack of immortality.

Against the background of this devaluation of immortality, the radicalism of Whitman's explicit affirmations of mortal life register more strongly:

I exist as I am—that is enough,
If no other in the world be aware, I sit content.
And if each and all be aware, I sit content.⁴⁹

Notice how this passage on the self-sufficiency of mortal existence repudiates key elements of Whitman's first and second visions of death. If it is "enough" to exist as one is, then consolation in the face of mortality is unnecessary. If it is "enough" to exist anonymously, then desire for immortality is superfluous. Mortal existence is worthy of affirmation on its own, without the promise of immortality.

Whitman's poetic effort to affirm mortality is part of a larger poetic effort to encourage his fellow citizens to surmount their Puritan heritage and say with him, "The earth—that is sufficient."⁵⁰ If Whitman can convince them of the adequacy of the earth even in the absence of heaven, he can open them up to a more loving and intense engagement with life, which in turn can open them up to unforeseeable and unsuspected forms of creation, beauty, and sublimity. In "A Song of the Rolling Earth" (1856), Whitman ties earth-affirmation and self-affirmation together inextricably:

I swear the earth shall surely be complete to him or her who shall be complete!

I swear the earth remains broken and jagged only to him or her who remains broken and jagged!⁵¹

Affirming the earth is vital to realizing oneself. Seeing the earth as perfect instead of fallen emancipates energy from misplaced regret and disappointment. The here and the now become sites of abundance and infinite possibility rather than of incorrigibility and lack. Viewing the present as a site of abundance and infinite possibility in turn allows the imagination to soar to unforeseeable heights and conceive forms of world-building unimaginable in the cramped mental landscape of Puritan self-abasement. Whitman affirms mortality to emancipate life from mortal anxiety. Conceding that life will someday end encourages individuals to value mortal life appropriately: as an abundant site of potential beginning.⁵²

Marking the achievement of intellectual maturity and optimizing the freedom of its adherents, Whitman's third vision of death is his best. Of the three visions, it most powerfully embodies the Socratic virtue of respecting the limits of knowledge, and of preferring to live in ambiguity and admitted ignorance than in the deluded sureness of false knowledge.⁵³ Of the three visions, it also does the most to reconcile its adherents to the world's lack of metaphysical certainties. By helping readers see that metaphysics and

theology distract us from the things we can best know and know best—the things of everyday life—the third vision redirects its adherents toward proper appreciation of ordinary experience.⁵⁴ Reimmersed in ordinary life and fully attentive to it, Whitman's readers can then see how the earth is more wondrous than history's most magnificent visions of heaven. The wondrousness of the ordinary seduces them into a fuller participation in the present, and reveals why the present should command our greatest reverence. The present is the time of freedom, the only time we can exercise freedom. "Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds," Emerson said in "The American Scholar" (1837). "This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it," he also declared.⁵⁵ Spotlighting the present as freedom's time, Whitman's third vision of death moves us to reflect on how best to use that time; it also urges us to live some of it spontaneously, while we still have the chance for adventure. Agnosticism about death energizes wonder, freedom, and life in Whitman. The question remains, however, how it enhances democratic citizenship.

Death and Democratic Life

If we conceive of democracy as a form of common life based on respect for the equal dignity of every individual, and that aims to promote the equal freedom and flourishing of every individual, then democracy demands that 'citizens regard each other as ends, as embodiments of infinite potential.'⁵⁶ So conceived, democracy requires that citizens show maximal openness to one another, so that they may find the beauty in one another, even when antidemocratic historical legacies and social forces condition them to see themselves or others as fundamentally lacking. Maximal openness to others in turn requires intellectual humility, vigilance against prejudice, and a disposition to resist ways of seeing and interpreting that mark some people as unimportant or irredeemably inferior.

Instantiating both intellectual humility and critical distance from inherited orthodoxy, agnosticism about death comports with the personal openness democracy requires. Citizens capable of overcoming fear of the unknown—death being the ultimate unknown—are more likely to respond constructively to difference than those so terrified by death that they would rather subscribe to a predetermined view of it than let its unknown quality

be. Citizens agnostic about death, in other words, are more likely to confront difference with equanimity, to let it speak, and to revise their worldviews in light of it, than to prematurely categorize difference within a rigidly held, totalizing worldview. James Baldwin highlighted the danger mortal anxiety posed to democracy when he wrote, in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), "Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have."⁵⁷ In the quest for immortality, Baldwin suggests, we imprison ourselves in identities forged through condemnation of difference. Through religion, race, and nation, in other words, we abandon the self "to a larger self from which one regains oneself magnified"⁵⁸ to attain heavenly salvation or immortal membership in a death-defying, world-historical, national, or racial project. Mortal anxiety thus destroys the affirmation of both self and other that democracy requires.

In staving off the desire for metaphysical certainty, however, agnosticism about death enhances democratic citizenship. Citizens who can live with uncertainty about death are better prepared to live with the diversity and turbulence democracy sets free. Democracy's uncertainty consists not just in the unpredictable results of elections and legislative decisions, but also in the uncertainty that inevitably results from the proliferation of freedom.⁵⁹ The proliferation of freedom entails the upending of traditional boundaries and the unsettling of comforting conventions.⁶⁰ She who can bear both mortality and freedom's turbulence lightly is more likely to assume the posture of welcoming curiosity that Whitman associates with the democratic self:

Aside from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
Looks down, is erect, bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
Looks with its side-curved head curious what will come next,
Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it.⁶¹

Agnosticism about death is a form of looking with "side-curved head curious what will come next." Instantiating the courage and openness needed to respond constructively to democracy's "diversity of differences,"⁶² it marks the maturation of the democratic self.

Notes

Thanks to Thomas Dumm, Kennan Ferguson, George Kateb, and John Seery for constructive comments on an earlier draft of this essay. Thanks especially to Melvin Rogers and Morton Schoolman, whose challenging criticisms have proven enormously helpful.

1. Plato, *Apology*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and John M. Cooper, in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 29a.

2. *Ibid.*, 40c-d.

3. *Ibid.*, 42. For two important commentaries on Socrates' orientation toward death in the *Apology*, see John E. Seery, *Political Theory for Mortals: Shades of Justice, Images of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 48-52; and Jeffrey E. Green, "The Morality of Wonder: A Positive Interpretation of Socratic Ignorance," *Polis* 21, nos. 1 and 2 (2004): 65-66.

4. For the purposes of this essay, I confine myself to Whitman's antebellum work, specifically the first, second, and third editions of *Leaves of Grass* (1855, 1856, 1860). Whitman's encounter with the mass death of the Civil War complicates his views on mortality in important ways, which I hope to address in future work.

5. Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), xx-xxiv, 37-42, 55-59, 63-64.

6. George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), 178-83; George Kateb, "Democratic Individuality and the Meaning of Rights," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 183-206; George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); George Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 142-47; Morton Schoolman, *Reason and Horror: Critical Theory, Democracy, and Aesthetic Individuality* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 164-250; Jason Frank, "Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People," *Review of Politics* 69, no. 3 (2007): 402-30; Jason Frank, "Promiscuous Citizenship," this volume.

7. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass*, 1st ed. (1855), in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the of the Printed Poems*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, Arthur Golden, and William White, vol. 1, *Poems, 1855-1856* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 8. I have used the variorum to reproduce Whitman's text as it originally appeared in the 1855, 1856, or 1860 editions. For ease of cross-referencing, however, I refer to poems by their titles in the 1891-92 *Leaves of Grass*.

8. Ibid., 7.
9. Ibid., 80.
10. Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in *Leaves of Grass*, 2nd ed. (1856), in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum*, 1:221.
11. Walt Whitman, "To Think of Time," in *Leaves of Grass*, 2nd ed., in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum*, 1:105.
12. See Harry Gershenowitz, "Whitman and Lamarck Revisited," *Walt Whitman Review* 25 (September 1979): 121–23; Gershenowitz, "Two Lamarckians: Walt Whitman and Edward Carpenter," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 2 (Summer 1984): 35–39; and David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Random House, 1995), 246.
13. Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," 217.
14. Ibid., 217–18.
15. Kateb, *Inner Ocean*, 248.
16. Whitman, "Song of Myself," 82.
17. Ibid., 3.
18. The formulation that "there is no death, only change of form" is Morton Schoolman's, which expresses his interpretation of Whitman on death. Commentary on the panel "Walt Whitman and Democratic Vistas Today" (at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, Massachusetts, August 28–31, 2008). Schoolman intimates this view—but does not state it this forcefully—in *Reason and Horror*, 172.
19. Walt Whitman, "Full of Life Now," in *Leaves of Grass*, 3rd ed. (1860), in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the of the Printed Poems*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, Arthur Golden, and William White, vol. 2, *Poems, 1860–1867* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 407–8.
20. Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," 218. For an account of how Whitman relativizes time and space and gives birth to new conceptions of "democratic time" and "democratic space," see Schoolman, *Reason and Horror*, 240–47.
21. Walt Whitman, "A Song of the Rolling Earth," in *Leaves of Grass*, 2nd ed., in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum*, 1:266.
22. For a fine consideration of the way written words enable the transcendence of time and space, see Susan McWilliams, "Thoreau on Body and Soul," in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Jack Turner (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 247.
23. Whitman, "Scented Herbage of My Breast," in *Leaves of Grass*, 3rd ed., in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum*, 2:365–66.
24. Whitman, "Song of Myself," 7.
25. Ibid.

26. Whitman, "Scented Herbage," 366.
27. I owe the matchless concept of "vibrant materiality" to Jane Bennett. See her *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).
28. On the idea of the presence of the present, see Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, expanded ed. (1981; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 9–10, 61; Thomas Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 21, 67; and Thomas Dumm, *Loneliness as a Way of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 154–55.
29. Whitman, "Scented Herbage," 366–67.
30. Ibid., 367.
31. Critchley, *Book of Dead Philosophers*, xv–xix.
32. Cf. Kateb, *Inner Ocean*, 146–47; and Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes*, 145.
33. Cf. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*, 180–81; and Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes*, 145.
34. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" (1837), in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 63–67.
35. This ecstatic gratitude for being is similar to the "nontheistic gratitude for the earth and the abundance of life" professed by William Connolly ("Confessing Identity/Belonging to Difference," in *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, expanded ed. [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002], xxvii).
36. Emerson, "Self-Reliance" in *Essays: First Series* (1841), in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 276.
37. Whitman, "Who Learns My Lesson Complete?" in *Leaves of Grass*, 1st ed., in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum*, 1:152–3.
38. Ibid.
39. As Schoolman observes, "Whitman is adamant in his refusal to decipher or interpret the unknown" (*Reason and Horror*, 167).
40. Whitman, "Who Learns My Lesson Complete?" 153.
41. Whitman, "Song of Myself," 79.
42. Ibid.
43. Contrary to Martha C. Nussbaum's claim that Whitman understands God as "immanent in the world" (*Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 657).
44. Kateb, *Inner Ocean*, 266.
45. Cf. Schoolman, *Reason and Horror*, 185, 200: "Whitman is convinced and makes plain his conviction that nothing before us is without wonder and that

no wonder, on that account, should be left out of account or can be given a complete account, and that every account only returns us reflexively to the mystery and wonder that provoked it. . . . Mystery and wonder . . . appear as the definitive *gestalt*, the definitive value of the being of the world." Cf. 176.

46. For discussion of popular attitudes toward death in Whitman's time, see Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799–1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); and Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), chap. 1.

47. Whitman, "Who Learns My Lesson Complete?" 153.

48. *Ibid.*, 153–54.

49. Whitman, "Song of Myself," 26.

50. Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," in *Leaves of Grass*, 2nd ed., in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum*, 1:226.

51. Whitman, "A Song of the Rolling Earth," 270.

52. In this way, Whitman anticipates Hannah Arendt's effort to emancipate modern men from obsession over physical self-preservation and to reorient them toward freedom: "though they must die, men are not born in order to die but in order to begin" (*The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. [1958; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998], 246).

53. Whitman's third vision of death is also arguably his best claim to what Stephen K. White calls "the only sort of dignity that belongs uniquely to humans": "bearing witness truthfully to my condition of subjection to mortality" (*The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009], 73).

54. On the extraordinariness of the ordinary in democracy, see Dumm, *Politics of the Ordinary*; Frank, "Aesthetic Democracy"; and Frank, "Promiscuous Citizenship."

55. Emerson, "American Scholar," 69, 68.

56. Nussbaum credits Whitman with teaching readers "what it is to see men and women as ends, and to see the boundless and equal worth of each and every one of them" (*Upheavals of Thought*, 645). See also Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

57. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 339. On Baldwin as a theorist of democracy, see Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). For a beautiful consideration of Baldwin's effort to reconcile his fellow citizens to mortality, see George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), chap. 5.

58. Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes*, 324.

59. Eric H. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (1941; New York: Owl Books, 1994).

60. William E. Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

61. Whitman, "Song of Myself," 5.

62. Schoolman, *Reason and Horror*, 219–20. Cf. Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity*, 9–16.

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