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Elegy and Eros: Configuring Grief

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Elegy and Eros

Configuring Grief

The issue is not just that we grieve, nor when we grieve. The issue is not just why we grieve in poetry, nor how the beautiful song of poetry capitulates to or conspires with the task of weeping. These and more. I like to think of the sound of weeping, along with the sound of laughing, as among the first thoughtful articulations a human being ever made. More than growls or grunts, more than snarls or barks or howls, weeping and laughter indicate passionate responses to experience, to a perception of circumstances not only in the present but in the past and—even more fascinating—the future. Nothing else cries or laughs the way we do. These two primary forms of vocalization evolve further into song: ecstatic language, as it were, standing beside itself, speaking out of its head. It is no accident that the two fundamental modes of lyric poetry are precisely these, crying and laughing, the intonations of grief and pleasure. By this I mean the elegy and the love poem.

I want to consider the configuration of the elegy, particularly the lyric elegy of the American 19th century, for I think it is a creature unto itself. At hand is the problem of Walt Whitman's great poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." I want first to remind us of the complex narrative structure of Whitman's poem for his beloved deceased, and to unpack the poem's dense sets of images, stories, locations, and most important, its figures. As I intend the term, a figure is not just a body, a human figure; and not just a trope or metaphor, a figure of speech; but also a number, a mathematical figure. Next, I will relate this poem to another central 19th-century American elegy, Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death." Finally I will propose a paradigm shift in our thinking, and reading, about the American elegy.

* * *

Strange things are afoot. A foot in Whitman's poetry is a different body part than in other poets' work. Whose body is before us in Whitman's lilac elegy? The literal circumstance of Whitman's great poem is the funeral procession following Abraham Lincoln's assassination and death on April 14, 1865. Good Friday indeed. Whitman's poem accompanies the death train that slowly bore Lincoln's body from Washington, D.C., all the way to burial in Illinois. At least in its beginning, the poem abides by a conventional, ritualized manner of mourning. Surely this poem is forefather of *The Waste Land*, commencing as it does in April, the cruel month, and proceeding in a series of aggrieved stages, through the city, into nature, into death, toward something sounding like prayerful redemption. As Peter Sacks argues in *The English Elegy*, the performance of ritual—the mournful, often staid formulation of grieving—is an elegy's primary rhetorical gesture.

Whitman's lilac elegy begins just so:

1.

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

2.

O powerful western fallen star!
O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

In these first sections we hear a sober, then almost quietly sobbing voice of the poem, in radical contrast to Whitman's usually hortatory and encouraging profusions. This is, remember, the Ur-poet of exuberance, cheerleader for democracy, the electrically charged poet of erotic contact and corporal intelligence. But note in section 1 the restraint, the underspoken dignity, as well as the formalized introduction of the poem's primary tropes, the triple image-

into-symbol or, as he says, the “trinity sure to me you bring” that accompanies the poet’s imagination through the odyssey of this poem. This trinity will evolve, eventually becoming the western star, or the planet Venus, which serves as a figure for Lincoln; the fragrant, plentiful, natural emblem of lilac; and, as a stand-in for Whitman, that hermit thrush with its doleful song. The particular curse of spring’s eternal rebirth here, its immeasurable irony, lies in its perpetuating *memento mori*, its blooming reminders of death. That is Eliot’s terror in *The Waste Land*, and Whitman’s: he not only mourns but “yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.” But why Venus, the goddess of love, in an elegy? Why lilac? Why, for that matter, Lincoln? More on those vexations shortly.

Section 2 sounds the poem’s death knell and identifies the crisis at hand: how to face “the black murk that hides the star,” how to accept that death has taken the new democratic hero. Juxtaposed with the stasis of this seemingly insoluble problem is section 3, the “miracle” of the natural trope, a lilac growing by an old farmhouse with its human “heart-shaped” leaves and its perfume. In the odor of lilac—is there anything so sweet, so profuse?—lingers a touch of the poem’s subversive power: psychologists tell us the sense of smell is our most nostalgic sense, the one most capable of triggering memory. It is also our least articulable sense. That is, we have far fewer words to describe smell than any other sense. Another irony then: such bodily knowledge yet such intellectual stupor. But of course this is the romantic’s ideal formulation. I’ll say more about the scent of lilac in a moment.

Section 4 activates another sense, the sound of the solitary thrush’s song calling from deep within nature’s heart, from “the swamp,” a place not quite water or land, or perhaps more meaningfully for Whitman, a primordial place of both water and land. This solitary singer seems a strange figure for Whitman, usually so gregarious, hungry to situate himself among others and sing “over the rooftops of the world,” as he says in “Song of Myself.” But again, so much about the lilac elegy is atypical. Whitman is not by any means an elegiac poet. Grief, sadness, pessimism are not the keys in which he typically plays. He is so energetically urban and hopeful, so enlivened by the prospect of crowds and bodily contact. But this will be one of the central trajectories of the poem: to move away from the city, into the solitary, inhuman woods, in order to find his voice and regain his poetic vocation. The song he hears—always a necessary intonation in an elegy—is “death’s outlet song,” and the singer, the bird, is literally “his brother.” Notice the increasing archaic formality at the end of this section. “If thou wast not granted to sing thou would’st surely die” takes its diction from Quaker idiom. Whitman’s mother was a devout Quaker, we may remember.

Sections 5 and 6 find Whitman propelling his poem forward, making it move, as the train moves. Elegies rarely have momentum, preferring the mournful deportment of stasis, stillness. Here the natural images seem

battle-scarred (the Civil War blue and gray of violets and debris, the “spears” of wheat and grain “shrouds”) but also potentially healing as the world “springs back” to life. The gathered crowd of people in section 6 abides by Sacks’s elegiac formula, becoming a countrywide funeral mass, listening to the poem’s song, here still a “dirge.” Notice at the end of this section how Whitman transplants the sprig of lilac which he broke off at the end of section 3 into the coffin of the president.

Section 7 continues the gestures of enlargement and forward motion: “with loaded arms I come, pouring for you.” Echoing the dark confessions of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”—which he first published in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* as “Sun-Down Poem” (note the westward-facing gesture)—where Whitman’s desire for intimacy and human sameness finds him admitting that “not you alone” are weak or blank or susceptible to pain, here the figure of the dead hero first becomes a trope for all the dead of the war: a figure, in fact, for death itself, “O sane and sacred death.” The “you” of the poem evolves, swelling past them all, to the very thought of death: “For you and the coffins all of you O death.” Then in a gesture of quiet but fertile abundance, he hastens to cover death “all over” with bouquets of roses, lilies, and as he says, “mostly” lilacs. He seeks not just to adorn the coffin but literally to bury death.

An aside about all these flowers. I mentioned earlier the immense, lush fragrance of the lilac. Why this flower, apart from its springtime significance? Imagine the body of Lincoln traveling, so slowly, for days and days across the country. Imagine the potential smell. We know that people heaped flowers on the railcar as it passed or as it stopped. They are paying tribute, but they are also covering the stench. Thus, for Whitman, the lilac provides a powerful aroma, not just a “scented remembrancer” but a natural air freshener, making the very air new.

Whitman slows his momentum in section 8, at the point where he begins to discover his vision of transcendence. To be reborn, first he must die, or at least descend to an underworld. He calls it “the netherward black of the night.” Thus Whitman’s scheme for the elegy enlarges to include an epic trope. He himself walks into a dark wood, his Virgil the star, and commences his own journey to death. This is one of my central points: not just Lincoln but also Whitman must die in this poem. His elegy, like his great song of himself, is ultimately a self-elegy. He asks for strength and direction in section 9, “lingering” in spiritual limbo in the swamp. He listens to the thrush; he begs for it to “sing on.” Like the bird, Whitman yearns to sing; it is his natural demeanor. But of course the second crisis of the poem is that the death of Lincoln has stifled or murdered Whitman’s ability to sing and to praise. Such is the point of his awful doubts in section 10:

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?
And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?
And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love?

Sea-winds blown from east and west,
Blown from the Eastern sea and blown from the Western sea, till there
 on the prairies meeting,
These and with these and the breath of my chant,
I'll perfume the grave of him I love.

These first three questions serve to ask how Whitman himself might assume the qualities of the poem's eternal constants—the star, the lilac, the thrush: how, he asks, can he “warble,” how can he shine, what shall be his perfume? Immediately nature answers. Carried on the world's winds, a breath of inspiration floats to him from around the globe. He breathes in (*spiro* is Latin for “I breathe,” we might recall) the breath of the world and knows now that his simple expiration will be his song. To expire exercises both of its meanings: to breathe out and to die.

Section 11 also proceeds by question and answer. That is, for a time he has suspended his impulse for literal propulsion—for movement, for change—in order to impel the poem by purely rhetorical means. Having found his breath, Whitman beseeches the subject for his song's exhalation:

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?
And what shall be the pictures that I hang on the walls,
To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,
With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid and bright,
With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun,
 burning, expanding the air,
With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the
 trees prolific . . .

He's preparing to reinvigorate the movement of his vision. But with what materials, he asks, can he refute death? The answer is: with life, with the body, the charged sensations of the natural, mundane, and eternal world. This world is—in both biological and writerly terms—prolific.

In this section and the next two, Whitman's tone changes, as though gathering new energy. He identifies and enacts his discovered subject, the “miracle” of daily life and the resulting new “song” borne “out of the cedars and pines.”

Whitman now can read the song of his brother, the dull “gray-brown” bird, for the song has become a “loud human” one. Has the bird become human, or has Whitman become something other-than-human? Rarely in traditional elegies do the speakers’ identities themselves evolve.

So we arrive at the center of the poem, the critical 14th section, wherein resides the song itself. This song seems like a force of nature, a powerful emanation. Here the cloud of death with its train-like “long black trail” has enveloped the whole world, and it is from this darkness that Whitman walks hand in hand with his two companions to listen to the thrush’s “carol of death.” Note, too, that the song is no longer a dirge:

*Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.*

*Prais’d be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.*

Just as this poem began, here the bird’s song commences with Whitman’s invocation and proceeds through his translation of natural sounds into human ones. It is hard to characterize quickly the stunning power, the lyrical grace of these remarkable, formalized quatrains. The song of mourning has been transformed into a song of “praise! praise! praise!” His intensified diction, his incredible confidence, his giving over to the “bliss of death” is Whitman at his most reverent and awe-struck. It is this poet’s greatest, most empowering paradox that at his most awe-struck, he is at his most articulate and artful. As the cloud of death covered the world, now he spreads his song—once a dirge, now a carol, now a “serenade”—over treetops, oceans, prairies, and teeming wharves.

It remains to exit. Section 15 is Whitman’s summary explanation of the song. He looks back to the war-ravaged landscape to review the horrible sight of battle corpses. But his vision clarifies as well:

*I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer’d not,
The living remain’d and suffer’d, the mother suffer’d . . .*

In war’s paradox and elegy’s consolation, the dead are free to rejoin the natural world while the living mourn and ache.

But Whitman's poem continues, hastening now, growing beyond the night and swamp, beyond the song of the bird. He insists on revivifying the poem's procedure, its journey, its rhetorical evolution. For his song—in section 16—has evolved into a “psalm,” its ultimate holy transfiguration. As the breath of the song floats away, “passing,” as he says, so does Whitman, pausing only to return the lilac sprig to the farmhouse door (is it Lincoln's old homestead?). He bids farewell to the poem's assembled subjects—Lincoln, the war dead, the trinity of signifying tropes—but also he bids farewell to his old self. He has integrated all with all, death with life, and the despair of a country that tore itself in half with its continued, in fact rejuvenated, promise of continuity.

Let me reiterate a few central observations about the lilac elegy.

1) The poem begins as a schematic for funereal or elegiac ritual. Literary, even religious rituals must first have been natural. Certainly Whitman's ritual is naturalistic, primitive—both pagan and holy. But quickly he abandons the static, inherited social ritual of the elegy in favor of a journey, a purposeful retreat from cultural engagement, and invents his own new transcendental, self-reliant elegy of praise.

2) The poem makes important use of trinities: three dominant symbols (lilac, star, thrush); three figures (Lincoln, the war dead, Whitman); and another group of three I want to come back to shortly. We recognize the Christian significance here, but the number reverberates with other possibilities as well. In writing about Book IV of *The Republic*, for instance, Susan Sontag sees how “Plato has been developing a tripartite theory of mental function, consisting of reason, anger or indignation, and appetite or desire—anticipating the Freudian schema of superego, ego, and id (with the difference being that Plato puts reason on top and conscience, represented by indignation, in the middle).”

3) The lilac elegy resists the elegiac impulse for the static or suspended. It demands momentum, horizon, evolution. The figure of Lincoln turns into the assembled war dead, then into death itself, even the figure of Democracy, and so becomes, ultimately, Whitman's figure of The Poet. The poem is driven by Whitman's desire to find a road back from isolate grief to the social realm, and to locate a method and language to enable the restoration of the body and of the body politic, his democratic hope. Just so, the musical genre of the dirge transforms into the carol, then the serenade, and finally the psalm. That is, elegy becomes folk song becomes love song becomes testament.

This is one of Whitman's greatest achievements, given the severity of the poem's circumstance. For this is Whitman's particular horror: he saw the supreme figure for the democratic experiment in Abraham Lincoln, born out

West, on the prairie, a self-invented, self-realized man, rough yet incredibly articulate. A hero-spokesman of the people. But this perfect natural man was killed—in an act Whitman saw as both heretical and self-loathing—by one of his fellow citizens. And this is the horror of the Civil War: How could the country Whitman loved, the world's greatest social and natural experiment, fail? How could it declare war on itself, killing its own beautiful son?

As I said before, the elegy for Whitman is highly atypical. He is a poet of social encouragement, and more so, a poet of erotic adventure. Whitman is a love poet, not a death poet. Even his early Civil War poems in “Drum-Taps” are generic and unbelievable, populated by faceless boy-soldiers whose bravery is unimpeachable and obvious and whose sacrifice seems negligible. These lines from “First O Songs for a Prelude” show Whitman's naïve sense of heroism as the war commenced:

Arm'd regiments arrive every day, pass through the city, and embark from
the wharves,
(How good they look as they tramp down to the river, sweaty, with their
guns on their shoulder!
How I love them! how I could hug them, with their brown faces and their
clothes and knapsacks cover'd with dust!)
The blood of the city up—arm'd! arm'd! the cry everywhere . . .

Only after he spent months at a massive tent-city hospital outside Washington, D.C., did the war become real. In December 1862, Whitman traveled from Brooklyn to search for his brother George, a wounded Federal soldier. Amazingly, he found George and nursed his wounds. But after George healed and left (back to battle, in fact), Walt remained as a volunteer aide. Here he witnessed the nightmarish side of the democratic experiment, as he washed the bodies of maimed men and boys, brought them candies, bread, tobacco, gave them coins, wrote hundreds of letters to their families. In more than 600 trips to the hospital, Whitman became nurse, doctor, brother, mother, friend, and savior to tens of thousands. David Reynolds estimates that Whitman had contact with between 80,000 and 100,000 soldiers in the tents. This experience changed him utterly. It gave him the blood-coated horror that informs the lilac elegy.

I want to examine one more aspect of this poem, its most significant exchange, back in the swampy woods, with Walt and his two “companions.” Therein lies the secret. But before I grapple with it, I want to pause, like Walt, suspended in the swamp. I need to listen to the song of another poem, from only two

years earlier in 1863, by Emily Dickinson. This is another elegy, a funeral poem, in fact another strange American self-elegy:

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity—

If Whitman is not accustomed to the mode of the elegy, Emily Dickinson is gloriously at home with death, her weirdly familiar afterlife, and the language of that other world. How often does she sink through floorboards or grass into the grave? “And then a Plank in Reason, broke, / And I dropped down, and down—.” How many times does she speak, as a corpse, to corpses?

I will not linger so long over this poem, her most renowned work, but I do want to walk through some important details. This is, to my thinking, the other great American elegy of the 19th century. How homely and comfortable

is this ride in the hearse. How much fun! Dickinson's speaker seems hardly to have died at all, but merely goes on a little trip out of the village into the countryside and beyond. Does this sound familiar?

Whitman's ironies are situational, while Dickinson's are both situational, or circumstantial, and tonal. How indeed is death "kind"?—yet he seems mannerly, genteel, even attractive. So another journey commences, with Dickinson, her companion Death, and the strange third figure, Immortality. Notice how small and meager Dickinson seems. Yet she clearly does not feel weakened or diminished by the presence of her powerful companions. In her rhymes, in fact, she seems purposely to point out to us the imbalance between "me"—two mere letters—and "Immortality," a dramatic, capitalized idea of such multisyllabic magnitude that it requires nearly a whole line. When we add the consideration of meter and stress, though, we see how delighted she seems to reverse the polarity of power between those two concepts. "[M]e" is smaller than "Immortality," and yet that little word commands a much heavier stress, even as "Immortality" fades away into lighter syllables and silence. "Me" is a very confident single pulse. "Immortality" staggers, wavering from its unwieldy size. We'll see a similar unbalancing irony in the last stanza's rhyme of "Day" and "Eternity," echoing off.

And that carriage: we know from Dickinson's own dictionary that a carriage is a heavy four-wheeled vehicle, suitable for cumbersome loads (like a hearse), compared to a buggy, more likely for a spin taken by lovers. Like Whitman, Dickinson takes a trip, a more homely odyssey here, as we imagine the slow funeral procession out of town to the gravesite. The speaker has "put away her labor and her leisure, too," her whole life, for the journey. In stanza 3 she retraces a life's progression, from childhood to maturity to death—in the figures of the schoolyard, the fertile fields, the sunset—and then in a touch of technical genius Dickinson decelerates yet continues her journey precisely at midpoint, in the radically enjambed third stanza (just as Whitman did at his poem's midpoint). We think the life is over when the sun sets, and yet, notice how it's all merely slowed down, how she continues the trip, as the sentence and the sun resume in stanza 4. How deliberate, how halting, but how clearly continual: "We passed the setting sun— // Or rather—He passed Us—" Those brilliant dashes, and pauses, and enjambments—passing much as Whitman "passed" in section 16 of the lilac poem.

At this point Dickinson's body seems extremely vulnerable, exposed to time and the elements. Her burial clothes are dew and gossamer (a spiderweb-like material), her veil like a nun's but of silky tulle. And at just this point, arriving at the grave, the hearse ride surprisingly continues. They pause before the grave-swollen ground, glance at the tomb, and then go on. Go on and on, for centuries. Eternity, for Dickinson, is not a place at which one arrives. It is

rather the journey-toward, a continual evolving. That's the radical importance of the last little preposition of the poem. If we are going "toward" Eternity, then we are clearly not "at" it, nor ever will be.

I am taking pains to establish several narrative and figural details in both poems, because I think we are in the presence of a radically new attitude toward the elegy, very different from the English tradition. How hopeful, these Americans. Where is the promised land, heaven, the next life? Upward? No. Lincoln's train is moving westward, and Whitman's gaze is likewise to the west. Where is Venus? "Drooping early" in the western sky. And in what direction is Dickinson traveling? If they pass the sun, or rather he passes them, then they too are going west. American Heaven is not upward, it is Westward ho. The promise is that the West will be forever a beckoning, enchanted horizon, a manifest destiny of perfection.

Sacks asserts that the English elegy performs a ritual stillness of mourning and obedience, essentially a tribute to traditional forms of power. But consider the journey, the odyssey, these two poets undertake. They will not hold still nor bow down. In fact, the speakers insist on evolving. In many ways these poems reject conventional myths of mourning. Even Dickinson's apparently reverent meter—the common or anthem meter of her father's Protestant hymnal, after all (you can sing most of her poems to the tune of "Amazing Grace," or "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," for that matter)—even her meter is ironized by her blasphemous subject and radically idiosyncratic style and syntax. In these poems, the poets and their speakers are complicit in the narrative. They resist the static, the merely observant; they are not submissive; they do not seek the solace or council of a hierarchy of power-holders, whether religious, literary, or political. They are active participants in their own songs and become the subjects of their own elegiac impulses. Both of these are self-elegies.

If indeed they are elegies, or elegies only, at all. It's time to cut to the real chase, to look hard at the most audacious element in both of these poems. Dickinson's work, with its more obvious configuration, will help us recover the very oblique but primary passage of the lilac elegy that I skipped over.

If Dickinson's poem is an elegy, the story of a funeral procession, it is also just as clearly a love poem, the story of a mild 19th-century date. She has a suitor, they have a chaperone, and off they go flirting, secretly aroused. Her arousal becomes obvious in the sensations of stanza 4. Those garments are just as easily the apparel of a wedding party as a burial one, aren't they? *Today our bride is wearing a lovely, sheer white gown, a delicate shoulder-length veil*—she feels the innocent but clearly sensual excitement of her station. In fact, can't this whole poem be read as a wedding poem, the new couple on

the way to, and *past*, their house? The very earth is pregnant, “swelling” with fertile possibility—a condition and a type of residence where, elsewhere, she says she likes to “dwell.”

So what is the relationship of the elegiac to the erotic? And how does the eroticizing of her elegy permit Dickinson to subvert the elegiac tradition? Let’s look back at her first stanza. If this is a love poem, then why are there *three* characters in the carriage? Thus we come to two more of my central arguments. Precisely this: the transcendental American elegy *requires an erotic component*. The planet-figure of Venus—originally a vegetation goddess, who becomes the Roman goddess of love and, paradoxically, lover of Mars, the war god—is therefore not merely circumstantial but thematically central to Whitman’s elegy. But more: this elegiac-erotic component abides by a delicious observation made by Anne Carson in her *Eros the Bittersweet*. At issue again is the figuration of the poems, the math of the thing. In discussing the erotic lyrics of Sappho, Carson traces “the radical constitution of desire” in erotic discourse: “We see clearly what shape desire has: a three-point circuit.” That is, she continues, “where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved, and that which comes between them.” In other words, the geometry of lovers’ discourse is not a line between two points. It is a triangle.

“That which comes between them” indeed. What comes between lovers? In the present poems, death seems to come between lovers. Families, villages, communities, language itself—words, art—come between them; perhaps faith, ritual, God; perhaps their own bodies come between lovers. Certainly the self, its needs, its sense of awareness, of separateness, can “come between” them. Carson concurs: “It is not uncommon in love to experience this heightened sense of one’s own personality.” Who, I ask, has a more charged, complex sense of personality than lover Walt?

So, let us go then—ah, that other great love poem to despair—let us go back to the swamp, the primordial scene, where Whitman is listening to the bird sing its song of grief-becoming-praise. I’ve returned to the middle of section 14:

—lo, then and there,
Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest,
Appear’d the cloud, appear’d the long black trail,
And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.

Then, with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,
And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of
companion,

I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness,
To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

At this magically archetypal point, with death at each hand, the poem and Whitman's power shift into high gear. When that contact of hands is made, as though an immense electrical circuit were completed, Whitman dies—and is able to understand the song of the hermit thrush: "And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me, / The gray-brown bird I know receiv'd us comrades three, / And he sang a carol of death, and a verse for him I love."

These are complex figures. Who is "the knowledge of death," and who is "the thought of death," and how are they different? It's very hard to unpack this figuration with much confidence. Is one the foreknowledge of dying, while the other is the actual experience of dying? Are they two sides of the same thing, in the middle of which is Walt? Let me propose that these two figures serve the same functions as Death and Immortality in Dickinson's poem. They are the human fact of dying, and the human hope of dying into the next thing.

But let's not miss Carson's triangulation here, too, for I think it is precisely at this point where Whitman's elegy refocuses or is impelled into Whitman's erotic poem. In "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman longs for the contact of body with body, as a form of natural and democratic intelligence as well as a form of erotic exchange—erotic, autoerotic, homoerotic, all the same. To be electric is to be empowered: electrified, electrocuted, elected, one of the elect. Whitman persists in conflating the physical, intellectual, religious, and political. In "Song of Myself" he is "mad to be in contact" with the world's body. He sings with joy: "To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand." A touch, he tells us, "quivers me to a new identity." And in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the contact of arms, the touch of the "negligent flesh" of evening commuters, charges his vision. By this contact he is "fused" with "generations" both before and after his, and this transformation generates—it engenders—the power to drive his poem.

My point is that this triangle of contact in the swamp is a figure for erotic empowerment. The touch of bodies—the exchange of electricity, of seminal power—is Whitman's revivifying solution; he is medium, conductor, receptor, lover. His lovers are death, as Dickinson's are, and by marrying the figures of death both poets subsume it. Let me be more precise. Here I think both poets make an original adjustment to Carson's geometry. She identifies "lover, beloved, and that which comes between them." But in these two poems "that which comes between" the lovers may not be death. In fact, death already has two figures: Death and Immortality; or "the knowledge of death" and "the thought of death"—these are the lovers. "That which comes between" is,

instead, the human poet. The *poet* is the irritant, the poet disrupts the fatal coherence of nature, the poet embodies a radical irony, and then the poet provides the necessary point of contact (or reconnection) between death and the promised new world.

This is entirely a figure of the American transcendental imagination. Both Whitman and Dickinson purposely infuse a radical and personal erotic into the elegiac tradition. In these two poems, death does not defeat the self. It cannot stifle the song-of-the-self. Death is being joined and thus defeated. It is being married and thus embraced. It is being enlisted and thus domesticated. It is being compelled—reborn—out of its stasis into a dynamic, erotic adventure. That is to say, in the American transcendental lyric, the journey continues on, in the direction of the sun.