THE NEW WALT WHITMAN STUDIES

EDITED BY

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CHAPTER 13

Whitman Getting Old

Ed Folsom

> This is not death. It is the terrible
> suspension of life.
> I want a poem
> I can grow old in. I want a poem I can die in.
> —Eavan Boland, "A Woman Painted on A Leaf"[1]

Is Whitman getting old? Is the Whitman that a century-and-a-half ago alarmed and offended and amused and enraged so much of the country as the American Adam, the "rough" whose "barbaric yawp" confused even those who knew him well, the "comrade" whose homoerotic "Calamus" emotions created discomfort even as they were explained away by and absorbed into the friendship conventions of the time, the "democratic lover" who barged his way into the national (and eventually international) consciousness: Is this Whitman now so old that he is beginning no longer to exist? Has the nation's own conception of itself departed so far from the empathetic democracy Whitman gave voice to that its quintessential poet has now begun to seem feeble and quaint in his efforts to hold the variegated nation together in a loving democratic embrace? Is the very idea of America that inspired Whitman's poetry – an idea that embraced frontier expansion, democratic idealism, and chastened necessity of embracing diversity – getting cloyingly old?

Recently, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks turned to Whitman's 1870 *Democratic Vistas* and read it, a year into the Donald Trump administration, as a kind of "lab report" on "the American experiment to draw people from around the world and to create the best society ever." Brooks concludes that "so much of what he wrote rings true today: the need to see democratic life as an exhilarating adventure, the terrible damage done when you tell groups that they are of no account, the need for a unifying American mythos, the power of culture to provide that mythos,

[1] Eavan Boland, *In a Time of Violence* (New York: Norton, 1994), 69.

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and above all, the reminder that this is still early days. We're still a young country."[2] But this optimism based on a stubborn belief in America's perpetual youth is itself beginning to feel old and stale. Whitman's clouded and misty democratic vistas were, we realize, always cast by him as ideals to be realized only at some distant point in the future, with our American present always seeming degraded and underdeveloped, prematurely diseased: "Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present. . . . Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of The States are not honestly believed in. . . . The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. The men believe not in the women, nor the women in the men."[3] That was Whitman's country in the midst of Reconstruction, but it has always been hard to see how the United States got from this deeply diseased and divided state to the tolerant democracy that always seemed to beckon for Whitman on the distant horizon, "a generation, or ever so many generations hence."[4]

Even by the early twentieth century, when Hart Crane set out to write an affirming response to Whitman's work in *The Bridge*, he came quickly to realize the bridge from America's past to its realized future he hoped to construct was revealing itself to be more like a pier, with no viable connection to that long-imagined democratic fulfillment. As he began to map out *The Bridge* in 1923, Crane felt the spirit of Whitman coming alive in him: "I begin to feel myself directly connected with Whitman. I feel myself in currents that are positively awesome in their extent and possibilities." But only three years later his emerging poem seemed a ruins: "intellectually judged the whole theme and project seems more and more absurd. . . . If only America were half as worthy today to be spoken of as Whitman spoke of it fifty years ago there might be something for me to say."[5] The impatience with the non-arrival of the future Whitman seemed to promise was already, a century ago, beginning to feel old.

Certainly Whitman criticism itself is an aging enterprise. It has been going on for nearly 170 years now and during the past 65 years has been a particularly bustling academic industry, producing on average more than 200 publications a year – accumulating to around 15,000 books, articles,

[2] David Brooks, "What Holds America Together," *New York Times* (March 19, 2018).

[3] Whitman, *Democratic Vistas: The Original Edition in Facsimile*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 11.

[4] Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," in *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 308. Hereafter *WWPP*.

[5] Letters to Gorham Munson (March 2, 1923) and Waldo Frank (June 20, 1926), in Brom Weber, ed., *The Letters of Hart Crane, 1916–1932* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 128, 261.

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reviews, translations, musical compositions, poems, plays, films, stories, and novels about or based on Whitman, published just since the centenary of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It seems fair to ask if there really is anything left to say about the biographical subject or his work, even as we realize that, of course, there is. There is, for example, always more work to write about: What other author has, long after his death, continued to add to his corpus so many letters, forgotten newspaper articles, overlooked early poems, and unpublished manuscripts, not to mention a newly discovered novel and book-length journalistic series?[6] It seems that each year brings new discoveries, as if this author – self-described as "garrulous to the last" – is somehow still producing new work more than 125 years after his death. And Whitman has been a remarkably resilient author in terms of being easily absorbed by and responsive to shifting critical, methodological, and theoretical fashions. As this Cambridge volume attests, Whitman's varied interests, the ways he absorbed and responded to a vast range of cultural movements and historical events, means his work has offered fertile ground for emerging interests in Book Studies, Queer Theory, Deconstruction, and many other recent approaches to literature. But there has been a gradual, almost imperceptible, shift in our view of Whitman and his work, as if we have been searching for the Whitman who can address and respond to a growing cultural despair instead of the Whitman who spurs on an endless optimism. We are, after all, at a far different period of the nation's history than that which he experienced, a point where some of the democratic payoff that Whitman promised should be far more apparent than it is, a point where we need a different Whitman, one more tempered in his outlook, older, pointing not the way to a fully achieved democratic future but rather guiding us about how to live in a diminished present on an earth of diminishing resources, in a society where the same old problems – of racial injustice, of unfair wealth distribution, of gender discrimination – just keep resurfacing.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that one of the new portals for understanding this prolific poet is old age itself. An increasing number of critics are turning to Whitman's old-age poems, so far the least discussed of his poetic work. These short poems lend themselves to multiple developments in critical methodologies and fashions: "aging studies" has been developing as an interdisciplinary field for a couple of decades now,

[6] See the recently discovered (by Zachary Turpin) *Manly Health and Training* (1858) and *The Adventures of Jack Engle* (1852): *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 33 (Winter/Spring 2016), 147–83; 34 (Winter/Spring 2017), 262–357.

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probing the cultural discourses that construct our perceptions of aging and dying; periodical studies has taken off in recent years, fueled by the ongoing digitalization of newspapers and easy academic access to searchable databases of nineteenth-century periodicals, providing quick access to the newspapers where Whitman first published his late poems; correspondence studies has developed as an offshoot of the creation of digital databases that allow for the construction of full sets of two-way correspondence between authors and their many correspondents. In Whitman's case, most of the preserved letters he wrote and received are from the final ten years of his life, a time when he was becoming famous as a literary figure and a time when his many fans – from the United States and abroad – enacted the role he imagined for them: active responders to him, carrying on a conversation he began as he stopped and waited somewhere for our reply. But those hundreds and hundreds of late letters – like many of his late poems – also document his continual complaint about the physical woes of an aging body, an insistent reminder that this poet of death began his career imagining his ecstatic and ecologically dispersed death – "And as to you death, and you bitter hug of mortality . . . it is idle to try to alarm me . . . And as to you corpse I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me, / I smell the white roses sweetscented and growing, / I reach to the leafy lips . . . I reach to the polished breasts of melons" – and ended his career expressing in excruciating detail the feeling of being trapped in a failing body that confronts, rather than merges with, death: "To-day shadowy Death dogs my steps, my seated shape, and has for years – / Draws sometimes close to me, as face to face."[7]

Walt Whitman got old at a very young age. It happened quite quickly. During the first two years of the Civil War, he was part of the rebellious bohemian crowd at Pfaff's beer hall in New York, the notorious author of the radical and obscene *Leaves of Grass*, then in its third edition, with the controversial "Enfans d'Adam" and "Calamus" poems causing a whole new uproar, an uproar that has persisted in various forms and for changing reasons to this very day. Then he went to Washington DC and attended to sick and wounded soldiers, who commonly called the forty-four-year-old poet "old man." His hair and beard turned whiter, and, when he was fired from his government job in the Department of the Interior at least in part because of his indecent book, his fiery friend and supporter William Douglas O'Connor came to his defense and wrote a long and widely distributed screed that in 1866 transformed the young radical into the kind and patriotic "Good Gray Poet."

[7] Whitman, *WWPP*, 85–86, 653.

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The rebranding was a success, and Whitman was never youthful again. The war had aged him, O'Connor's portrayal had aged him, and a series of health crises continued to age him rapidly. Before he was out of his forties, he was widely perceived as an old man, and he began dressing and acting the role. His series of photographs from the war forward reveal a carefully cultivated aging prophet, a vivid contrast to the young urban rough of the iconic frontispiece portrait of the 1855 and 1856 editions of *Leaves*.

His poetry seemed to get old along with him. Whitman criticism has long dismissed the post-Civil War poetry as far inferior to the work that appeared from the mid-1850s through the war, and critics like C. Carroll Hollis have tracked the remarkable shifts in Whitman's diction as he moved from a slangy and informal Anglo-Saxon vocabulary to a heavily inflected Latinate one in which his magical "you" morphed into a more Biblical "Thou," often inflating his poetry to a kind of prophetic pomposity.[8] As we read chronologically deeper into Whitman's work, we find ourselves entrapped, Hollis argues, "in an elaborate, nonconversational, heavily Latinate, intentionally complicated style."[9] Hollis's argument works for most of the postwar poems, but only recently have other critics begun to tease out the latent power of the very last of Whitman's poems, the poems that he was forced to append to *Leaves of Grass* in three "annexes" – two that he oversaw the publication of and one that was appended five years after his death by Horace Traubel. These poems, as Anton Vander Zee has recently shown in detail, were virtually ignored by critics and biographers – or mentioned only in embarrassed asides – until M. Wynn Thomas, Betsy Erkkila, George Hutchinson, and a few other critics began to take them seriously as poems.[10] Thomas offered particularly sensitive readings of "the dramatic life and moral honesty of the best of the late poems," and he revealed Whitman as "an explorer of his many-charactered old age."[11] Poets too have been turning more and more to these last poems: Robert Creeley's final published essay before his own

[8] See Hollis's still-revelatory *Language and Style in Leaves of Grass* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), where he tracks the many changes – in diction, metonymy, negation, and other linguistic acts – between Whitman's early and late styles; his tabulations of Latinate diction are on pp. 255–56.

[9] Hollis, *Language and Style*, 224.

[10] Anton Vander Zee, "Walt Whitman's Late Lives," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 35 (Fall 2017), 174–200; "Inventing Late Whitman," *ESQ* 63: 2 (2017), 641–80; and "Late Whitman: Critical Pasts, Critical Futures," *Resources for American Literary Study* 40 (2018).

[11] M. Wynn Thomas, "Whitman, Tennyson, and the Poetry of Old Age," in Stephen Burt and Nick Halpern, eds., *Something Understood: Essays and Poetry for Helen Vendler* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 164.

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death was about Whitman's old-age writings: "The common sense is that Whitman's poems faded as he grew older, that their art grew more mechanical and that the poems themselves had rarely the power of his more youthful writing. The life, however, is finally the poetry, the issue and manifest of its existence – not as some mystic aspect of vision or of surreal realms of elsewhere, but literally so." These poems, Creeley argues, teach us "that age itself is a *body*, not a measure of time or record of how much one has grown."[12] In these poems, Whitman records unflinchingly how his aged body with its "Ungracious glooms, aches, lethargy, constipation, whimpering *ennui*, / May filter in my daily songs."[13] He had initially worried about what these poems would reveal – "I still write a little, but almost hate to not wanting to tack on lethargy & indigestion &c to what I have already uttered," he wrote in an 1888 letter[14] – but he decided to annex the poems nevertheless. If death and dissolution in "Song of Myself" had seemed exhilarating – "I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun, / I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags" – now, while recognizing death's inevitability, the poet wants only to linger in the "twilight," the "opiate shades": "(I too will soon be gone, dispell'd,) / A haze – nirwana – rest and night – oblivion."[15] What I want to explore in this essay are some of the ways that this still largely ignored corpus of Whitman's work may be his most modern and radical, as he discovers poems he can die in, and as he invents forms that give body to the act of dying.

To begin, let's examine one poem written in the heart of the Civil War, a poem that marks in both thematic and formal ways Whitman's quick change from youth to age. The poem is "Year that Trembled and Reel'd beneath Me":

> Year that trembled and reel'd beneath me!
> Your summer wind was warm enough – yet the air I breathed froze me;
> A thick gloom fell through the sunshine and darken'd me;
> Must I change my triumphant songs? said I to myself;
> Must I indeed learn to chant the cold dirges of the baffled?
> And sullen hymns of defeat?[16]

[12] Robert Creeley, "Reflections on Whitman in Age," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 81 (Spring 2005), 262.
[13] Whitman, *WWPP*, 614.
[14] Whitman to William Sloane Kennedy, May 7, 1888, in Whitman, *The Correspondence*, vol. 4, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 169.
[15] Whitman, *WWPP*, 89, 532. [16] Whitman, *WWPP*, 442.

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This brief six-line poem captures concisely and starkly the momentous change that Whitman was experiencing in his life, his poetic career, and his nation's history in the tumultuous year of 1863, which began for him with his decision to take up residence in the nation's capital and to devote himself to visiting and caring for the endless thousands of wounded soldiers in the war hospitals that were now everywhere in Washington, gathering up the tens of thousands of wounded and dying soldiers from the year's battles in places like Stones River, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and Chickamauga: 1863 *did* in fact seem to tremble and reel, as blasting artillery and raging battles produced maimed bodies throughout the country. In the poem, the 1863 warm summer winds uncannily bring air frozen with fear and death, and the summer sunshine eerily darkens rather than illuminates, like the thick smoke of those ghastly battlefields obliterating the light. New words enter Whitman's poetic vocabulary now, as he discovers the confident "triumphant songs" of his prewar editions of *Leaves of Grass* shifting tonality to "the cold dirges of the baffled" – his optimistic celebratory songs of unity sinking to "sullen hymns of defeat."

Before, Whitman sang *songs* – the song of himself, the song of the open road, a song of the rolling earth – but those acts of celebratory singing now turn (like the sunshine becoming darkness, like warm winds freezing the lungs) to baffled *cold dirges*. In this somber poem, Whitman continues to speak to himself, just as he had done in his earlier "triumphant songs" ("I celebrate myself"), but now the tone is doubtful, querulous, resistant – "Must I change my triumphant songs? said I to myself." In "Song of Myself," Whitman had rejected "what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end": "I do not talk of the beginning or the end," he wrote, because life and death seemed to him one ongoing endless process without division or separation. "There was never any more inception than there is now, / Nor any more youth or age than there is now": Life is always life, emerging eternally from what we call death, so there is no need for dirges; there is only "Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world."[17]

The critic Garrett Stewart years ago reminded us of how, when we *listen* to a poem instead of simply *read* it, we can often hear words that don't appear in print, words that our "reading voices" vocalize by the linguistic phenomenon of "transegmental drift," when the end of one word adheres to the beginning of the next word to create a new word voiced out of the space between words, unseen but heard.[18] In "Song of Myself," for

[17] Whitman, *WWPP*, 190.

[18] See Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

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example, Whitman's lines about "the hounded slave" contain the striking image of "my gore dribs thinned with the ooze of my skin." Most readers, if they are listening to the poem aloud, hear the beginning of that phrase as "my gored ribs" – the transegmental drift ("gor*e d*ribs") alters the subject/verb to an adjective/noun, and we *hear* something different from what we *see* (we *see* the dribbling gore, but we *hear* where on the body that wound occurred). Whitman often plays with these unseen but heard words in his poetry. Hidden in that 1855 triple-urge sexual chant ("Urge an*d ur*ge and urge") – disguised by the transegmental drift of the "d" of "an*d*" adhering to the "u" of "*u*rge" that allows us to hear in that push of desire the proleptic echo of the inevitable death that accompanies any birth – is "urge *and dirge* and urge." It is as if Whitman, in 1855, was invisibly embodying in the very sounds of his procreant song the word that would emerge as so central to his Civil War experience of mass death. Every procreant urge ultimately results in a death-dirge as the body is recycled into compost that eventually will urge out new life again. That is why beginnings always have ends, startings always have partings, yet the ends never really are endings but always beginnings again: *urge and dirge and urge*.

So, in this brief Civil War poem about sensing deep in his own body the shifting tones of his life's work, Whitman once again allows us to hear an unseen echo of his earlier work: In "col*d d*irges" we can hear the *cold urges* that the war has frozen into him, turning sunshine and warmth to ice and darkness. Whitman and the nation have emerged from a period of warm *urges* into a period of cold *dirges*, and Whitman's new songs now register that deep change, even as they and he and the nation realize they will have to seek a way out of the time of dirge back to the procreant urge of trying to reconstruct a renewed nation. This will be the excruciating work of Whitman and the Reunited States in the years following the war – to find ways to re-chant (and re-enchant) the hundreds of thousands of funeral songs into a reunified song of new birth.

Beginning with this poem, dirges continue to echo in Whitman's work up through his very last poems. In *November Boughs*' "From Montauk Point," we find "The wild unrest, the snowy, curling caps – that inbound urge and urge [*urge* and *dirge*] of waves, / Seeking the shores forever."[19] These lines are indicative of how Whitman returns again and again in his old age to the beginning of his career to pick up key images and embed those hidden transegmental drifts again. The hidden slippages appear again in "Old Age's

[19] Whitman, *WWPP*, 613.

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Lambent Peaks," where "the touch of flame," we realize, also voices "the touch *of lame*" that old age has brought with it.[20] This poem follows right after "An Evening Lull," describing "a week of physical anguish": We see the touch of beauty and heat and desire ("the touch of flame") that can still emerge from the touch of lame, "the changing hues of all": the changing hues o*f f*all, the autumn beauty of old age, flaming once more into the fiery colors that bring a momentary beauty before the dark winter. We note later how in "Now Precedent Songs, Farewell" Whitman gives us a remarkable random catalog of his life's poems – many with casually truncated titles ("Adam," "Captain! My Captain!") – and emphasizes how each emerged from his body ("fibre heart," "throat," "tongue," "my life's hot pulsing blood"), just as that key word "urge" appears again: "The personal urge and form for me."[21] Now it's the word *form* that adheres to what comes after – "form fo*r me*" – the *forms* that emerge from his artistic urges to create those lovingly cataloged poems, but also the "*personal* urges" that result in the "*for me*": These forms that dot the pages of his annexes are forms of a *self* (a "me"), brought forth from the *person*, the body, that resulted from his parents' urges and now drifts toward its final dirge.

In these late poems as well, Whitman suddenly introduces a surprising new variation into the way he structures his poetic line. As Matt Miller has convincingly demonstrated, Whitman's great discovery in the years leading up to the 1855 *Leaves* was his long and metrically fluid line.[22] Those lines had always been individual and often portable units that he sometimes lifted from one passage and moved to another (or simply rearranged by cutting and pasting them into a new order).[23] One consistent marker of these lines was the end punctuation: All of Whitman's lines in *Leaves of Grass* before the annexes ended with some punctuating mark. But in the annexes of old-age poems, he suddenly began experimenting with lifting the punctuation from the ends of lines. It is as if he finally realized the power of the missing period at the end of the long opening poem in the 1855 *Leaves* that we know now was a printing mistake, a result of loose type that allowed the period to drift and break off after only a few copies were printed (and that he quickly corrected in the 1856 and all subsequent editions).[24] But in his very late poems, he

[20] Whitman, *WWPP*, 635. [21] Whitman, *WWPP*, 634–35.

[22] See Matt Miller, *Collage of Myself: Walt Whitman and the Making of Leaves of Grass* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 7–9.

[23] See Geoffrey M. Sill, "'You Tides with Ceaseless Swell': A Reading of the Manuscript," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 6 (Spring 1989), 189–97.

[24] See Ed Folsom, "The Census of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*: A Preliminary Report," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 24 (Fall 2006), 77–79.

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begins to play with, feel the delight in, lifting the old punctuational stricture that brought breath to a pause at each line's end.[25] Here he anticipates the radical uses of and discoveries about enjambment of poets like William Carlos Williams. In "Sounds of the Winter," for example, Whitman leaves the second line hanging with the unpunctuated "strain," allowing the word to suggest both the sound of winter's varied music ("a distant strain") but also capturing the demand on the poet's deteriorating body to both hear and record this fading multifaceted song that the poem now strains across the line break to embrace:

> Sounds of the winter too,
> Sunshine upon the mountains – many a distant strain
> From cheery railroad train – from nearer field, barn, house,
> The whispering air – even the mute crops, garner'd apples, corn,
> Children's and women's tones – rhythm of many a farmer and of flail,
> An old man's garrulous lips among the rest, *Think not we give out yet,*
> *Forth from these snowy hairs we keep up yet the lilt.*[26]

In the poem that follows this one in the second annex, "A Twilight Song" – a kind of exercise in memory to imprint the Civil War dead in both his mind's eye and his poetry ("You million unwrit names all, all . . . deep, deep within my heart recording") – he leaves the fourth line hanging: "The brief truce after battle, with grim burial-squads, and the deep-fill'd trenches / Of gather'd dead from all America. . . ."[27] Here the "trenches" remain literally open, unstopped by punctuation, as Whitman's poetry itself does the duty of a burial-squad, filling that yawning openness with the countless bodies of the dead. "The Dead Tenor" in the first annex creates a similar powerful effect by leaving the line ending in "absorbing" open, playing again on his still "rapt" ears that "strain" through their physical wrapping for the musical "strains" that his soul can still catalog after the hungry and unpunctuated "absorbing": "How through those strains distill'd – how the rapt ears, the soul of me, absorbing / *Fernando's* heart, *Manrico's* passionate call . . . ."[28]

[25] In one sense, of course, Whitman had been using this kind of enjambment from the 1855 *Leaves* on, in that his long runover lines created a similar effect of carrying breath over to what appeared on the page as a new line, though the indentation marked the runover as the continuation of a line instead of the beginning of a new line. The 1856 *Leaves*, with its compact size and relatively small page, required even more of this kind of line runover, which some critics have read as an important form of enjambment. But true enjambment did not arrive until Whitman's final poems.

[26] Whitman, *WWPP*, 646–47. [27] Whitman, *WWPP*, 647. [28] Whitman, *WWPP*, 625.

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Whitman employs this creative use of enjambment – so unexpected and so radically new in his final years – a striking eight times in the annexes.[29] Sometimes the open punctuation allows him to play with his old transegmental drift of the *urge* leading to and growing from the *dirge*, but experimenting now with a *translinear* drift, as in "Soon Shall the Winter's Foil Be Here," where he imagines the spring emerging as the new plants "rise," but that hopeful *rise* falls over the line-break into (and out of) the soil of death: "a thousand forms shall rise / From these dead clods . . . ." Or when, in "Death's Valley," the poet faces death but continues to breathe life, even as that breath refuses to stop until it slides over to and through the next line (creating a long thirteen-iambic exhalation) to absorb the recognition of how closely death now accompanies every living breath: "And I myself for long, O Death, have breath'd my every breath / Amid the nearness and the silent thought of thee."[30]

One of the most stunning enjambments appears in "To the Sun-set Breeze" in the second annex, where the poet addresses the unseen but felt breeze that enters his window, and we get three lines that begin with "Thou/Me/Thou," the first of which is left hanging:

> Thou, laving, tempering all, cool-freshing, gently vitalizing
> Me, old, alone, sick, weak-down, melted-worn with sweat;
> Thou, nestling folding, close and firm yet soft, companion
> better than talk, book, art . . .[31]

That "Me" (with its comma) would, always before, have been at the end of the line above it, but here Whitman senses the power of casting it to the beginning of the next line, thus distancing (but not quite separating) in an almost excruciating way the soothing actions of the breeze from the "Me" that the breeze operates on. This way, the "Thou" with its restoring and comforting action flows into (and across to) the "old, alone, sick, weak-down" "Me," who is given the contrasting opening spot in the line to claim for itself the debilitated body that *needs* that momentary restoration, that

[29] Here are the eight poems (with, in parentheses, the enjambed lines for the poems that are not discussed in this essay). From *First Annex: Sands at Seventy*: "Fancies at Navesink: The Pilot in the Mist" ("Again I mark where aft the small thin Indian helmsman / Looms in the mist . . ." [*WWPP* 617]); "The Dead Tenor" (*WWPP* 625); "Soon Shall the Winter's Foil Be Here" (*LG* 630). From *Second Annex: Good-Bye My Fancy*: "To the Sunset Breeze" (*LG* 644–45); "Sounds of the Winter" (*LG* 646–47); "A Twilight Song" (*LG* 647). From *Old Age Echoes* (a posthumously published annex that does not appear in the Library of America edition of *Leaves of Grass*): "Nay, Tell Me Not To-day the Publish'd Shame" ("vital visions rise / Unpublish'd, unreported"); "Death's Valley." See *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 578–79; 580–81; hereafter *LGCRE*.

[30] Whitman, *WWPP*, 630; *LGCRE*, 580.

[31] Whitman, *WWPP*, 644–45.

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unseen (but still physical) flow through the window and across the poetic line that offers a nearly dead "Me" a fleeting sense once again of being a "vitalizing / Me," as the breeze brings a final touch of "the ocean and the forest . . . the globe itself swift-swimming in space" and becomes "universal concrete's distillation."[32] As the poet wrote to O'Connor in 1888: "I guess I am mainly sensitive to the wonderfulness & perhaps spirituality of things *in their physical* & *concrete expressions* – & have celebrated all that."[33] He had always celebrated how what we call the spiritual *has to be* contained in the material, but the message is never more poignant than in the final poems, where he feels the material becoming more and more "unseen." As he captures the way that "unseen" global and universal material – dissipated in the form of invisible atoms in the breeze – wafts from the far corners of the world through the walls of his house across the threshold of his window, he invents a new disruption in his poetic form – the enjambed line – to imitate and enact that penetrating crossing over, "gently vitalizing / Me, old, alone, sick. . . ."

What is most striking to me, however, about these last poems is the gradual disappearance of the "I" on the page, as in the poem that concludes Whitman's first annex, "After the Supper and Talk." Here Whitman sets up what promises to be a simile: The poet's departure from his readers is "As a friend from friends his final withdrawal prolonging." The simile, however, never materializes, and the "I" we expect to enter into the poem never appears except as it is buried in the homophonic "aye," here part of an adverb meaning "forever" or "for eternity": "Soon to be lost for aye in the darkness – loth, O so loth to depart! / Garrulous to the very last."[34] The "I" is already forever lost in the darkness, diffused and no longer able to materialize as it speaks its final garrulous word (and even the word "garrulous," from imitative and echoic Indo-European roots meaning "to cry," maintains a faint echo of the 1855 "barbaric yawp"). Now it is as if he cannot bring himself to say this is *I* who is departing, or perhaps it is that the "I" has already in some sense left. In any case, the poem is a study in the deferral of the *I* and the *you* that would form the vehicle to the tenor of the embedded metaphor ("as a friend leaving friends, so I leaving you"). The entire poem – all of the old-age poems, really – are a deferral. But in this one, as in several others, we get the aural "I" buried in the "aye," an *I* that is already lost in the darkness, unable now to materialize as it had done so memorably at the end of "So Long," the poem of departure that

[32] Whitman, *WWPP,* 645.

[33] Whitman to William D. O'Connor, April 18, 1888, in Edwin Haviland Miller, ed., *Selected Letters of Walt Whitman* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 254.

[34] Whitman, *WWPP,* 636.

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this one replaced in 1888. In "So Long!," the poet could imagine "depart[ing] from materials," being "disembodied, triumphant, dead," but still remaining an "I" who "may again return," existing in "my many translations" and "avataras."[35] As he begins experiencing rather than just imagining his dispersion and diffusion, we experience the marker of the self, the tall proud English first-person pronoun, fading into an affirmation ("aye") that affirms only endless time ("aye" also means "forever" or "eternity"), a time devoid of the "I" that speaks its own erasure – "Soon to be lost for aye in the darkness."

We experience these poems differently when we read them with our ears rather just than our eyes, as the "I" keeps slipping into "aye," always evocatively. Readers of poetry are familiar with the ubiquity of the pun "I/eye," which is virtually impossible to avoid in English. But Whitman explores a less familiar homonym for "I"; his homophonic play on "I" and "aye" begins during the Civil War, when he feels deeply how the loss of such an overwhelming number of young men – thousands of whom he met and cared for in Washington's Civil War hospitals – could never be compensated for by the restoring power of the composting earth, which will always and forever (*aye*) generate new life but never again generate any one specific identity (*I*). See, for example, the original *Drum-Taps* version of "The Banner at Daybreak": "Demons and death then I sing; / Put in all, aye all, will I" and "Aye all! For ever, for all."[36] In this early "recruitment" war poem, Whitman's pun captures both the ecstasy and horror of losing the self (the "I" that "wills") in a more important "all" ("aye all"), as young men are roused to sacrifice themselves to a larger cause. Similarly, in "The Centenarian's Story," another *Drum-Taps* poem, we hear the "old Revolutionary" soldier, paying his respects at the graves of those with whom he had served so long ago, and feeling himself pulled to the ground where his comrades who died young had been buried. Their graves had in the intervening years already produced new life even as death obliterated their youthful individual lives that never had the time to fully gain identities, and now the centenarian's aging "I," still standing on the earth, feels itself dispersing into the same atomizing and spectral eternity: "Aye, this is the ground, / My blind eyes even as I speak behold it re-peopled from graves."[37]

As we saw in "After the Supper and Talk," Whitman's use of this suggestive homophone increases in the old-age poems, as his own sense of "I" begins to diffuse into "aye." In the 1876 "From Far Dakota's Cañons" (originally "A Death Sonnet for Custer"), he uses the aye/I pun as he writes

[35] Whitman, *WWPP,* 612. [36] Walt Whitman, *Drum-Taps* (New York: 1865), 14.
[37] Whitman, *WWPP*, 430–31.

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of Custer's formidable self dispersing at his death in defeat: "Desperate and glorious, aye in defeat most desperate, most glorious, / . . . Thou yieldest up thyself."[38] Here the aye/thy rhyme underscores the desperate and glorious slippage from self to everything. In his old-age annexes, the homophonic play becomes increasingly poignant, as in "Sail Out for Good, Eidólon Yacht," where the "I" feels itself slipping into an eternity of selflessness, but hangs on to identity as long as possible ("I will not call it our concluding voyage") until the "I" finally releases itself to "aye" ("Now on for aye our infinite free venture wending"), as he feels all the anchors of earthly identity yielding to the diffusion: "Spurning all yet tried ports, seas, hawsers, densities, gravitation, / Sail out for good. . . ."[39]

One of Whitman's final poems, "Death's Valley," a response to seeing George Inness's painting *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, imagines his own imminent journey into that dissolving incorporeal valley, and it is one of his most experimental poems. We saw earlier its creative use of the unpunctuated enjambment; it also evokes the "I/aye" homophone in what he intended as the opening stanza, which begins not with his familiar affirmative "I" ("I celebrate myself") but rather with its spectral homophonic companion, the one that the "I" knows it ultimately must drift into: "Aye, well I know 'tis ghastly to descend that valley."[40] But descend it he does, as he uses Inness's painting to lead him through a final earthly landscape that undoes his identity:

> I make a scene, a song, brief (not fear of thee,
> Nor gloom's ravines, nor bleak, nor dark – for I do not fear thee,
> Nor celebrate the struggle, or contortion, or hard-tied knot,
> Of the broad blessed light and perfect air, with meadows, rippling tides, and
> trees and flowers and grass,
> And the low hum of living breeze – and in the midst God's beautiful eternal
> right hand,
> Thee, holiest minister of Heaven – thee, envoy, usherer, guide at last of all,
> Rich, florid, loosener of the stricture-knot call'd life,
> Sweet, peaceful, welcome Death.[41]

Here, the "hard-tied knot" is the knot of selfhood, tied from the idiosyncratic mixing of experiences that form what we know as our self, our "I," that identity "strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings," as Whitman put it in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."[42] In his late poems, we feel

[38] Whitman, *WWPP,* 593. [39] Whitman, *WWPP,* 639. [40] Whitman, *LGCRE,* 581.
[41] Whitman, *LGCRE,* 581. Blodgett's transcription leaves out the word "brief" just before the parenthesis, which is clearly in the manuscript. I have added it here.
[42] Whitman, *WWPP,* 308.

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the knot untying, the beads falling off the string again, and the "God" that appears here seems to be the very hand of undoing, the "rich, florid, loosener of the stricture-knot call'd life." The "valley" of death is what everyone who has ever lived has (or will) enter, as the "I" becomes "Aye" ("Aye, well I know"), an affirmation and homophone for the self that has always been a kind of illusory sound, a repetition (*identity* in its etymological roots means "sameness") that turns our gathered and knotted experience into an "I," only to see it unraveled at the end, returned to the atoms of the universe – the aye (eternity) – out of which it was strung. The poet's "I" is "making a scene" here in a double sense: He is creating one last vision of the world as the self orders it, with its "blessed light and perfect air," its seemingly trite "trees and flowers and grass" (they're now generic – unlike, say, in *Specimen Days* – but they're still his beloved "grass," the leaves of grass that generated his poems and into which he now decomposes), but he is also resisting the dispersion (making a scene in that way: that idiom was common by the early nineteenth century) even as the "scene" and "song" he makes dissipate within one last striking experimental invention – a single open parenthesis, the final catalog of the world beginning in the containment of a self that knots it all into an identity but ending in an absence of containment, an endlessly open parenthesis that enacts the "loosener of the stricture-knot call'd life," the open and never again closed dispersion that is "sweet, peaceful, welcome Death."[43]

What makes Whitman's late poetry so radical, then, is that he has worked to dissipate the marker of self-identity, to write poems that track a self that is diffusing back into the world it emerged from, observing its physical body decaying, tracking its wandering thoughts, noting the things

[43] "Death's Valley" appeared in *Harper's* in the April 1892 issue, which was printed just a few days before the poet died, but Whitman was at that point too weak to examine or respond to that printing, so the intentionality of the lack of a closed parenthesis remains somewhat in doubt, though his final manuscript, which he carefully prepared for the printer, shows no parenthetical close, thus allowing "the hard-tied knot" to loosen across the line break into the light and air and meadows and tides and trees and flowers and grass and breeze – all the things of the world that the self's senses had taken in to form a knot of identity now returning back out to the natural world from which they came. When the poem appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in April 1892, just after the poet's death, the editors inserted a parenthesis after "knot," thus partially blocking the reading I'm proposing here. Early editors went with the *Harper's* version when the poem was published as part of the posthumous third annex to *Leaves of Grass*, but other editors have honored Whitman's eccentric and inventive use of a single open parenthesis (see Emory Holloway, ed., *Leaves of Grass: Inclusive Edition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1926), 464, and *LGCRE*, 581), a formal device we now associate with modern and postmodern poets, like Charles Olson. The manuscript (now housed at the University of Virginia's Alderman Library) and the original printing in *Harper's* are both available online on The Walt Whitman Archive, whitmanarchive.org (Whitman Archive IDs: uva.00073; per.00028); Whitman, *LGCRE,* 580–81.

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that are now beginning to exist not as a part of the self but as a part of the world the self will no longer be absorbing. "I" is swallowed up in the eternity of "aye." To the very end, Whitman maintained his faith in composting and dissolution, though the tonality and register of his voice faltered and altered as he revised and added to *Leaves* in the months before he died.

Asked how the 1892 last issue of *Leaves of Grass* would differ from the earlier ones, Whitman, on his deathbed, answered, "Why, *in being complete* – which is difference enough."[44] He demanded of himself a book that not only *imagined*, but one that *experienced*, life from the "starting" to the "parting," encompassing the span of an entire life, from parturition and increase through departure and decease. It is to those final poems that we, in our own troubled era, might now most usefully turn – informed by all we know from a century-and-a-half of reading Whitman's earlier work, informed by all we know from over a century more of the nation's and the world's history – to read work that increasingly seems tempered for our time.

[44] Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols. (Various publishers: 1905–96), 9: 546.

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