

WHITMAN'S FIRST-PERSON PLURAL

ALYSON BRICKEY



IN HIS 1855 POEM that he continually reworked for twenty-five years and eventually titled “Song of Myself,” Walt Whitman pulsates between the singular and the plural, reflecting on both the single “spear of summer grass” and the vast, multitudinous “journey-work of the stars.”¹ The poet constantly toys with the distinction between the one and the many in this text, which has become one of the most quintessential of American poems. This is partially achieved through his experimentation with poetic lists. His penchant for catalogues, especially in *Leaves of Grass*, has both fascinated and frustrated readers since its initial publication. Upon reading the collection for the first time, Ralph Waldo Emerson famously wrote, “I expected—him—to make—the songs of the Nation—but he seems—to be contented to—make the inventories,”² and in 1896 John Burroughs called the poem “a series of ejaculations, utterances, apostrophes, enumerations . . . with little or no structural or logical connection” (Miller xix). Were it not for the “intimate sense of the man back of all,” Burroughs exclaimed, “the piece would be wild and inchoate” (Miller xix). Whitman himself acknowledged that “it is the catalogue business that wrecks them all—that hauls them up short, that determines their opposition. They shudder at it” (Miller 145). Despite the sometimes negative associations with the poem’s catalogue form, more than one third of “Song of Myself” is made up of lists, displaying a steadfast aesthetic commitment to what can often feel an excess of enumeration.

Many have linked this technique to an explicitly American expression of democratic equality. This is partly because Whitman’s lists are often composed of a diverse range of American subjects, including but not limited to farmers, “lunatics,” police officers, enslaved people, children, women, carpenters, and thieves, among many others. In his foundational essay “Transcendental Catalogue Rhetoric: Vision Versus Form,” Lawrence Buell connects these stylistic experiments to the American Renaissance and its fascination with transcendentalist idealism, arguing that Whitman accentuates the “democratic side” of this philosophy, supporting its conception of “all persons and things” as “symbols of spirit . . . conjoined by analogy in an organic universe.”³ Similarly,

Edwin Miller argues that the lists display “a democratic choreography created by a perceptive observer—and lover—of the heterogeneous, classless American society” (Miller xi). and Harold Bloom characterizes Whitman’s poetry as enacting what he calls “the American sublime of influx” (Miller xxv).

In *The List: The Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing*, Robert Belknap identifies what he calls “modes of copiousness” in works by Whitman, Emerson, Melville, and Thoreau.⁴ It is Whitman alone, however, who holds a particularly privileged place, as “no one,” Belknap boldly claims, “has even approximated his efforts to create a poetics of listing” (29). Belknap connects Whitman’s enumerative style to what Hayden White calls “a democracy of lateral coexistence” housed within “a purposeful paratactic structure,” suggesting once again that the poet’s unique style does some kind of political work (Belknap 29, 86). Though reactions to Whitman’s poetry have certainly been diverse, the critical canon suggests that his lists come to represent, for many readers, an aestheticization of a rhetorically equalizing discourse. Whether identifiably American or not, something about Whitman’s catalogues seems to engender a critical consideration of democratic ideals.

In *Whitman the Political Poet*, Betsy Erkkila nuances the attention to Whitman’s excess by arguing that the personal and the political are entwined through the poem’s embodied patterns of not just influx, but also “efflux,” repositioning the speaker as one who “advances and retreats, absorbs and bestows.”⁵ The sexualized nature of Whitman’s verse, she contends, approaches the political ideals of America only by “testing and enacting poetically the principle of self-regulation in the individual and cosmos that is at the base of his democratic faith” (106). Erkkila tempers the critical tendency to align Whitman’s aesthetics with an uncomplicated faith in the promise of a pluralized America. While “democratic ideology gave Whitman a reason for being, a language of possibility, and a country to dream in,” the poet was also keenly aware of the failures of that ideology as it had manifested in the class inequities that were worsening, not improving, as a result of Jeffersonian liberalism (Erkkila 21).

Erkkila recalibrates a speaker in “Song of Myself” who doesn’t necessarily fulfill the political ideals of the founding fathers, but instead hesitates and oscillates in the face of them, giving us access to a more complex idea for which Whitman is advocating. The cultural mythology of those ideals has all too often served to elide the deep contradictions that constituted their enactment in the first place. Embedded even in the history of Jefferson’s first draft of the Declaration of Independence is the paragraph he was pressured to remove decrying the “assemblage of horrors” to which kidnapped Africans had been

subjected as a result of the transatlantic slave trade.⁶ In the very same moment, then, that this new nation was founding itself on the enlightenment ideals of liberty and self-determination, it was guaranteeing the continued enslavement of millions; a practice that would persevere for nearly another ninety years. This central tension in the history of the United States is thus reflected in the complicated, double movements that Whitman's speaker repeatedly performs.

Whitman's oscillating speaker allows us to reconsider the manner in which we continue to mobilize "Song of Myself" in the service of the necessarily exclusionary ideology inaugurated by the Declaration of Independence. In what follows, I suggest that what Whitman develops with this poem is not an uncomplicated manifestation of a pluralized democracy, but rather a poetic invocation, through listing, of a version of individualism that includes, at the same time and in the same movement, a celebration of multiplicity. Reconsidering what "Song of Myself" achieves as something other than what we call "democracy" allows us to re-read the poem as advocating for an ideal that carries with it more potential than what even Whitman himself politically envisioned.⁷

While the canon of American literature is no doubt tied to a particular version of self-reliance, Whitman's poem complicates that Emersonian ideal by insisting that we account for a type of communal, shared existence. While Emerson urges that we look within ourselves and "believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men. . . . Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense," Whitman's speaker seems to gain individual momentum from an outward-looking, voraciously social glance.⁸ Though we might be tempted to offer Whitmanian democracy as an ideological counterpoint to Emerson, I instead distinguish Whitman's oscillation between the singular and plural as something markedly more complex than a steadfast commitment to an identifiably politicized ideal.

Gunter Leypoldt suggests that it may not be Whitman's catalogues that engender an attachment to democracy, but rather the way in which we have already historically received the poet himself as ideologically committed to a particular polemic. "Whitman's method 'emerges' as democratic," Leypoldt argues,

only because he provides the necessary interpretation, the discursive "program," as it were, to his chants. It hardly needs to be pointed out that except at a very high level of abstraction, there is no ontological connection between, say, parallelistic catalogues and the idea of cultural inclusiveness (the catalogues in Hebrew poetry or the Bible rarely strike us as symbolic of democracy). If it now seems natural to associate stylistic de-hierarchization with political freedom, it is partly because we have already accepted Whitman's program before we listen to his song.⁹

The poem's speaker manages to consistently tread a line between strongly asserting a sense of individual identity (a brash "I" that some readers find too aggressive, too masculine, too self-involved), and an "I" that also opens itself up to a din of other voices and subjectivities. "One and all tend inward to me," he declares, "and I tend outward to them, ... I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise, / Regardless of others, ever regardful of others, / Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man, / ... I resist anything better than my own diversity" (Whitman 42). Here, Whitman's "I" is constituted by a variety of others, whom the poet roll-calls through their social positions. These archetypes "tend inward" toward the poem's speaker as if succumbing to some centripetal force, and he in turn "tend[s] outwards" toward them, creating a reciprocal, mutually constitutive relationship. Here the list is working to broaden the poet's field of inclusivity.

This gesture is structurally aligned with work of the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, whose concept "being singular plural" describes an ontology that depends upon relationality for its very existence. Working within continental philosophy's concern with questions of ethics and responsibility, Nancy envisions a type of sociality that pre-exists ethical behaviour. Responsibility, he believes, does not denote an obligatory action that must take place in response to an event, but rather it is the very condition of Being itself. "To be responsible," he writes, "is not, primarily, being indebted to or accountable for some normative authority. It is to be engaged by its Being to the very end of Being, in such a way that this engagement or *conatus* is the very essence of Being."¹⁰ "Conatus," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is an "effort, endeavour, [or] impulse . . . a force": a movement in which we are already involved. Our task, then, is not to create the conditions under which an ethical relation might be possible, but rather to acknowledge and maintain the relation in which we are already implicated: the condition of life itself as a condition of "cobelonging" (Nancy 201).

Within our contemporary intellectual concern with the ethics of alterity—what Emmanuel Lévinas structures as a face-to-face encounter with "The Other"—there is a focus on ideas of hospitality and openness to the unknown. Jacques Derrida calls this "say[ing] yes to *who or what turns up*."¹¹ This shift in emphasis from the self to the Other is a response to what many have diagnosed as western metaphysics' problematic obsession with the human subject: the lone Cartesian thinker who is more often than not constructed as white, male, and heterosexual; who is able to account for himself and understand his ontological position without the need for relation of any kind. By calling this solipsistic closed circuit into question, philosophers following Lévinas and Derrida attempt

to wrest epistemological control from the subject and place it squarely in the hands of the Other—be it an animal, human, or ecological counterpart. What Nancy argues is quite different, however: it is a rhetorical binding of the very categories “self” and “other.” Taking seriously Martin Heidegger’s notion of *Mitsein*, or the “Being-with” of existence, Nancy inextricably joins the self and other in what he calls “the first-person plural,” without erasing their individual characteristics (Nancy 26-27). Additionally—and here is where he diverges from Hegel—Nancy’s formulation does not require that self and other engage in a dialectic of power in order to move forward toward some more improved, enlightened, or evolved level of existence.

Nancy proposes that philosophy must start again with what he calls “first philosophy,” beginning again with Heidegger’s work and diverging when required (Nancy 26). Because of Heidegger’s collaboration with the Nazi Party during World War II,¹² Nancy posits that philosophy must “recommence” in order to

refigure fundamental ontology . . . with a thorough resolve that *starts from the plural singular of origins, from being-with*. . . . What would happen to philosophy if speaking about Being in other ways than saying “we,” “you,” and “I” became excluded? Where is Being spoken, and who speaks Being? . . . Again: *Being is put into play as the “with”* that is absolutely indisputable. From now on, this is the minimal ontological premise. Being is put into play among us; it does not have any other meaning except the dis-position of this “between.” (Nancy 26-27; emphasis Nancy’s)

This is neither an ethics for the Other nor for the community over the individual. Instead, Nancy offers an exposition of a shared ontology of singular plurality. It is within this philosophical context that I read “Song of Myself.” Under this lens, where singularity necessarily contains within itself a plurality of others and vice versa, the poem’s oft-quoted line, “I am large, I contain multitudes,” takes on a new meaning (Whitman 78).

Creating what Nancy identifies as “the interlacing of strands whose extremities remain separate even at the very centre of the knot,” Whitman fills his stanzas with lists that work not to assimilate and classify their members according to some normative standard, but to proliferate informational specifics without offering any real sense of categorical cohesion (Nancy 5). Echoing Nancy’s textile metaphor, Whitman writes, “Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and increase, always sex, / Always a *knit* of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life” (31; emphasis added). The radical simultaneity gestured at in these lines—the rhythmic repetition of “always,”

which also points to Whitman's interest in eroticizing even the form of the poem itself—undermines the sense of teleological progress denoted by words such as “advance,” “increase,” and “breed.” Instead of following a process from beginning to completion, we are asked to stay in this moment and experience plurality itself as meaningful, as all of these processes are already happening, all at once. More important, however, is the way Whitman here imagines a crowd of advancing equals who nonetheless remain distinct from one another: “singulars singularly together, where the togetherness is neither the sum, nor the incorporation [*englobant*], nor the ‘society,’ nor the ‘community’ (where these words only give rise to problems)” (Nancy 33).

In the passage above, Nancy expresses concern over ideas that would take the form of overtly politicized or ideologically polemic language. This wariness is due in no small part to the global horrors that have been repeatedly committed in the name of ideals such as social democracy, communism, and nationalism. In his book *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Paolo Virno similarly reaches for a notion of connectedness that is not based on an affiliation to a particular group or set of political ideals. Drawing on the writings of Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza, Virno prefers the term “multitude” to “people” when accounting for what he sees as the contemporary interconnectedness of post-Fordist modern life. “For Spinoza,” he explains,

the *multitudo* indicates a *plurality which persists as such* in the public scene, in collective action, in the handling of communal affairs, without converging into a One, without evaporating within a centripetal form of motion. Multitude is the form of social and political existence for the many, seen as being many: a permanent form, not an episodic or interstitial form. For Spinoza, the *multitudo* is the architrave of civil liberties The concept of people, according to Hobbes, is strictly correlated to the existence of the State; furthermore, it is a reverberation, a reflection of the State: if there is a State, then there are people. In the absence of the State, there are no people. In the *De Cive*, in which the horror of the multitude is exposed far and wide, we read: “The *People* is somewhat that is *one*, having *one will*, and to whom one action may be attributed.” (21-22, emphasis Virno's)

Whitman's use of the term “multitude” contains within itself the reverberations of the Spinozian concept of a group of distinct (and perhaps even contradictory) individuals. The entirety of “Song of Myself” can be read as a poetic grappling with the unruly, the beautiful, and the radically multifarious multitudes, who stand “plumb in the uprights, well entreated, braced in the beams, / Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical” (Whitman 31).

As readers, we are repeatedly asked to perform a type of rhetorical assemblage, deciding how or why these disparate subjects are held together in common.

The poem demands that we contend with its insistent force and dynamism: the incessant “urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world” (Whitman 30). Belknap connects what he identifies as a force of intrusion and the specific demands the literary list places on a reader: its challenge to hold together disparate and “strange” parts. Drawing on the work of Chaucerian Stephen Barney, Belknap notes that “lists adjust and shift as subsequent units are added . . . unanticipated dynamics develop when such ‘strangers’ are held together . . . crafted compilations ‘potentially react with the narrative that encloses [them],’ operating as ‘intruders’ that interrupt but represent some relation to the greater work” (17). In the case of “Song of Myself,” of course, we are dealing less with the challenge of holding together an overarching narrative structure than the difficulty of maintaining the poem’s status as a unified semantic whole. Because Whitman’s lists increasingly introduce elements of referential unpredictability, they constantly threaten the cohesion of the text itself. By crowding his stanzas with more information than we might be comfortable receiving, Whitman thus puts pressure on our ability to organize and make sense.

The poem’s consistent grammatical oscillation between the singular and plural confuses the distinctions between the speaker and the others who make up Whitman’s landscape; as a result, we feel we are learning more about him even as he is giving us more information about them. “It is time I explain myself,” the speaker boldly announces, “let *us* stand up” (Whitman 71; emphasis added). And, as the poem progresses, so too does its level of expansion. “There is no stoppage and never can be stoppage,” he declares,

If I, you, and the worlds, and all beneath or upon their surfaces, were this moment reduced
back to a pallid float, it would not avail in the long run,
We should surely bring up again where we now stand,
And surely go as much farther, and then farther and farther.

A few quadrillions of eras, a few octillions of cubic leagues, do not hazard the span or
make it impatient,
They are but parts, any thing is but a part.

See ever so far, there is limitless space outside of that,
Count ever so much, there is limitless time around that. (73)

Here we see expansion along several conceptual axes; time, space, even depth all reach to infinity. The poem amasses vast quantities of detail as it moves along, and we get the sense that had we the patience to count all that it listed here, we might indeed exhaust our intellectual resources and discover that its reach is

“limitless.”

In much of this poem, it appears that this expansiveness is a joyous and exuberant response to that which is wondrous, multiple, and surprising in its vitality. There are also moments, however, that invoke this sense of multitude in relation to suffering, pain, and inexplicable loss. In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy grapples with this second sense of unboundedness as it relates to the suffering of others—the perpetual violence that at any given moment is always multiple, and always taking place somewhere in the world. “It is an endless list,” he writes, “and everything happens in such a way that one is reduced to keeping accounts but never taking the final toll” (xiii). He calls this darker thing a “proliferation”:

[an] autistic multiplicity . . . that seems to have no other meaning than the indeterminate multiplication of centripetal meanings, meanings closed in on themselves and supersaturated with significance—that is, meanings that are no longer meaningful because they have come to refer only to their own closure, to their horizon of appropriation, and have begun to seek nothing but destruction, hatred, and the denial of existence. What if this autistic multiplicity, which tears open and is torn open, lets us know that we have not even begun to discover what it is to be many? . . . What if it lets us know that it is itself the first laying bare . . . of a world . . . with no meaning beyond this very Being of the world: singularly plural and plurally singular? (xiii-xiv)

Here Nancy attempts to account for those horrors that simultaneously overwhelm our abilities to make sense and demand that we understand them as important precisely *because* of their plurality: multiple wrongs committed against multiple lives. Calling this multiplicity “autistic” semantically yokes a sense of individual implication to what can often be seen as innumerable, distant, and affectively irretrievable others.

The oppression of so many Black lives is a mid-nineteenth century historical reality that is always running beneath the explicit joyousness of many of Whitman’s stanzas, working to temper his exuberance with a constant reminder that not all are free to “celebrate” and “sing” (Whitman 29). Throughout the poem, Whitman often contextualizes both individual and collective suffering in relation to enslavement. He tells of the “runaway slave [who] came to my house and stopt outside, / . . . I saw him limpsy and weak, / . . . / And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,” and insists that in his America, even the “heavy-lipp’d slave is invited” (36, 43). As he moves from an objective to a subjective perspective, however, Whitman (perhaps problematically) then *inhabits* the interiority of the enslaved person, claiming

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
 Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen,
 I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn'd with the ooze of my skin,
 I fall on the weeds and stones,
 The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
 Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with whip-stocks. (60)

Here the brash “I” of the poem strongly emerges, willing to not just acknowledge and then attempt to describe another’s suffering, but to actually appropriate that experience and claim it as his own. This is not just a playful subjectivity willing to roam far beyond the reaches of his own patch of grass; this is a speaker who harnesses the freedom to speak and uses it to speak for others who cannot claim such expressive mobility. Is this not, however, a type of epistemic colonization, ensuring that we remain even more ignorant to the experiential realities of enslaved Americans?

This accusation is, of course, a definite possibility, even if one argues that accessing experiential reality is not, in fact, the point or tenor of Whitman’s work. It is worth considering, however, whether the speaker’s perspectival drift is potentially complicating what can at first appear to be a straightforward act of appropriation. “*Through* me many long dumb voices,” he insists,

Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
 Voices of the diseas’d and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,
 Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
 And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the father-stuff,
 And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
 Of the deform’d, trivial, flat, foolish, despised, . . .

Through me forbidden voices,
 Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil’d and I remove the veil,
 Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur’d.
 I do not press my fingers across my mouth. (48; emphasis added)

Here we see Whitman positioning his speaker not as a witness offering testimony, but as a conduit through which we can somehow access those voices that have been silenced and lost: voices that help us hear those realities about which there is no dominant narrative other than exclusion. There is no risk here that we might mistake the voice of the speaker for the voices of countless oppressed others, since his loud, dominant personality never truly leaves this poem. Though the “I” claims to “be” the enslaved person, in other words, we

of course understand that he is anything but. He is free to roam and taste and make love to the world he inhabits, stopping only a while to ask that we somehow attend to the “interminable” list of others who do not possess such expressive luxury.

Whitman’s representational scope grows so large that it eventually encompasses even cosmic elements. In the following stanza, he begins from a very corporeal, personal place, and ends with nothing less than the sun itself:

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air
through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color’d sea-rocks, and
of hay in the barn,
The sound of the belch’d words of my voice loos’d to the eddies of the wind,
A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides,
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting
the sun.

Have you reckon’d a thousand acres much? have you reckon’d the earth much?
Have you practis’d so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?
Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,) . . . (30)

Rather than collapsing all of these details into one giant undifferentiated mass, Whitman’s speaker maintains a level of individual distinction. Delight, he reminds us, can be found just as equally “alone or in the rush of the streets.” This constant flicker between the self and the many colors the entire poem, resulting in an elastic form that will tolerate endless processes of expansion and contraction.

This may explain why, throughout the text, Whitman often uses the word “single” within the phrase “not a single,” always tempering the idea of total isolation with its opposite. “Not a single,” of course, can refer to no one or nothing at all, or it can merely act as a negation, countering the notion of one with the notion of many. The labourers discussed above are walking “in single file . . . seasons pursuing each other,” individually distinguishable and yet part of a larger chain: a longer, endless line (41). Later, we encounter “the meal” that the speaker has “equally set: this the meat for natural hunger, / It is for the

wicked just the same as the righteous, I make appointments with all, / I will not have a single person slighted or left away” (43). Here “not a single” refers to the absence of any one person who is not invited to this grand, inclusive table. “Each who passes is consider’d,” he assures us, “each who stops is consider’d, not a single one can it fail” (70). When the speaker recounts the murder of 412 rangers at Goliad during the Texas Revolution in 1836, he uses a list to render these men infinitely strong and defiantly brave—rugged and masculine:

They were the glory of the race of rangers,
Matchless with horse, rifle, song, supper, courtship,
Large, turbulent, generous, handsome, proud, and affectionate,
Bearded, sunburnt, drest in the free costume of hunters,
Not a single one over thirty years of age. (61)

With the final line Whitman reveals that these men were all in their twenties, urging us to now re-read their story with a tinge of lost potential and extinguished youth. Here, “not a single” stands in for a false hope that those who have suffered such violent deaths might have at least already lived long, fulfilling lives. Like the thousands of young soldiers who perished in huge numbers in America’s Civil War, however, these men stand in this stanza as a testament to the many brutal, singular sacrifices that are made in the name of the many.

In his book *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled*, Michael Cobb argues for a repositioning of the single person as a potentially revolutionary figure. Much of the history of philosophical and social thought, he reveals, has been rhetorically obsessed with the notion of the dyad, or couple, which has been preciously held above that of the individual. The single person, as a result, has been culturally marginalized as a sexual minority. “Individualism,” Cobb writes,

the value of aloneness, can barely be thought unless we strip away the pathologizing dynamics of coupledness that attach to the individual a bitter affect we might call loneliness. [. . .] Dialectics, encounters, face-offs, and conversations tend to be formally thought of as a relation between two (and rarely, especially now, one). True/false: we must wonder, even at the level of definition, why there are always two sides of every story. Why not three, or more? Or fewer? . . . Foundationally speaking, I think we tend to understand by way of a very conventional kind of interrelational dynamic, which can then make even the most progressive, ethically charged work deeply conservative along one structural axis: the intellectual world this work elaborates insists on theories that belong, in some fundamental ways, to the uninterrogated supremacy of the couple.¹³

Cobb advocates for what he calls “an aesthetics of distance,” whereby our attempts to avoid loneliness by obsessively crowding individuals together in a type of forced intimacy will be counterbalanced by a focus on the individual who is alone, but not necessarily lonely (30). Whitman’s constant fluctuation between the single and the many, therefore—his playful flitting between the self and a myriad of others that does not include a teleological focus on coupling as some necessary endpoint—can be imagined as an expression of someone “who may just want to relate to others outside the supreme logic of the couple, which has become the way one binds oneself to the social, otherwise known as the crowd” (Cobb 32).

In his configuration of his speaker as boldly “replenish’d with” his own “supreme power,” Whitman presents us with a single figure who is solitary, and yet anything but lonely (65). Despite his exuberant celebration of the world around him and the others within it, the speaker sings a song of himself. He does not, in the end, depend upon an other to justify or make whole his existence. What, then, are we to make of Whitman’s last line? “I stop somewhere,” the speaker says, “waiting for you” (79). Is this not an open invitation to the reader, suggesting that despite all of his confident solitary wanderings, Whitman’s “I,” in the end, feels incomplete without a reciprocal “you”? The rest of the stanza suggests that the opposite might in fact be true; that it may be us, and not the speaker, who desires an other. “If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles,” Whitman writes,

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you. (79)

It is the reader who is chasing Whitman’s elusive singer, not the other way around. We find ourselves left not just alone, but corporeally incomplete: in need of our blood “filter[ed] and fibre[d]” by his presence. The speaker seems to enjoy the company of others, but by no means requires it. “I am satisfied,” he assures us; “I see, dance, laugh, sing; / As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day with stealthy tread” (6). He finds pleasure in both proximity and distance, engaging in an intimacy with others that always gives way to a spacing. He ponders “exactly the value of one and exactly the value of two,” giving each equation equal weight, wondering

“which is ahead?” (31). This is not the portrait of a figure pressed urgently into a swelling crowd, but rather an account of one who wanders effortlessly, interlaced with others just as much or as little he pleases.

Nancy too positions a fundamental spacing at the heart of what it means to co-exist with others. “From one singular to another,” he writes,

there is a contiguity but not continuity. There is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme closeness emphasizes the distancing it opens up. All of being is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation; moreover, it is the heterogeneity of surfaces that touch each other. Contact is beyond fullness and emptiness, beyond connection and disconnection. (47)

Here, we see togetherness imagined not as continuity, in the sense of there being “no interstices or breaks” between individuals, but rather as contiguity, as touching “loosely. Close proximity, but without contact” (*OED*). This notion of being-with-others has at its core a sense of closeness that does not collapse the one into the many: an intimacy and adjacency that allows for the maintenance of individualism and individual space.

There is one point in the poem, however, where Whitman’s speaker sounds crowded and drowned, desperate for more space. “My lovers suffocate me,” he reveals,

Crowding my lips, thick in the pores of my skin,
Jostling me through streets and public halls, coming naked to me at night,
Crying by day *Ahoy!* from the rocks of the river, swinging and chirping over my head,
Calling my name from flower-beds, vines, tangled underbrush,
Lighting on every moment of my life,
Bussing my body with soft balsamic busses. (72)

Here the speaker is overwhelmed by the sheer number of those around him, using his lines to list verbs in the progressive present tense, lending to a feeling of constant motion and anxious unease. Others are too close, invading even the pores of his skin, assaulting him aurally, visually, and physically. The line between himself and others is rapidly dissolving here, and we get the sense that he wants desperately to redraw it. Despite this discomfort, however, these “busses” he receives—a word denoting harsh, smacking kisses and a potentially violent kind of contact—are rendered “balsamic” by the speaker: healing, healthful, and restorative. Instead of dissolving into the swelling crowd around him, he effectively transforms the experience into something pleasurable and light. By granting his “I” this representational power, Whitman ensures that

even when threatened, the sanctity of the individual is never truly at risk in his poem.

According to Nancy, it is a focus on the spacing between humans, a distancing that protects us against a total collapse into a single indistinguishable mass, that must be recognized. When we focus only on a politics of similarity or togetherness, an adherence to a particular group or loyalty to a particular ideological perspective, we risk closing that important gap. “What becomes of being-with,” he asks,

when the *with* no longer appears as com-position, but only as dis-position? . . . The question has to be posed as to whether being-together can do without a figure and, as a result, without an identification, if the whole of its “substance” consists only in its spacing . . . when thinking moves too quickly, when it is fearful and reactionary, it declares that the most commonly recognized forms of identification are indispensable and claim that the destinies proper to them are used up or perverted, whether it be: “people,” “nation,” “church,” or “culture,” not to mention the confused “ethnicity” or the torturous “roots.” There is a whole panorama of membership and property, here. . . . It is the history of the representation-of-self as the determining element of an originary concept of society. (47, emphasis Nancy’s)

Nancy’s suspicion about a type of belonging that requires a membership to a particular group is founded upon resistance to particular historical and political incarnations of totalitarianism. Indeed much of his book is indebted to a discussion of very specific social and political concerns, which he argues are fundamentally related to ontology. He believes that the notion of the ontological

does not occur at a level reserved for principles, a level that is withdrawn, speculative, and altogether abstract. Its name means the thinking of existence. And today, the situation of ontology signifies the following: to think existence at the height of this challenge to thinking that is globalness as such (which is designated as “capital,” “(de-) Westernization,” “technology,” “rupture of history,” and so forth. (46)

It is necessary, therefore, to understand the notion of “being singular plural” as grounded in and manifested by our real, lived, socio-political circumstances.

Whitman displays an awareness of and attention to these circumstances, as evidenced by his catalogues that not only build a very real and tactile world before our eyes, but also work to constitute what we might call a social “crowd.” Consider the following stanza, for example, in which uses a list initially anchored by an anaphoric “I hear” to help build a soundscape that swells and pulses with both life and death:

I hear bravuras of birds, bustle of growing wheat, gossip of flames, clack of sticks cooking
my meals,
I hear the sound I love, the sound of the human voice,
I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused or following,
Sounds of the city and sounds out of the city, sounds of the day and night,
Talkative young ones to those that like them, the loud laugh of work-people at their meals,
The angry base of disjointed friendship, the faint tones of the sick,
The judge with hands tight to the desk, his pallid lips pronouncing a death-sentence,
The heave'e'yo of stevedores unlading ships by the wharves, the refrain of the
anchor-lifters,
The ring of alarm-bells, the cry of fire, the whirr of swift-streaking engines and hose-carts
with premonitory tinkles and color'd lights,
The steam whistle, the solid roll of the train of approaching cars,
The slow march play'd at the head of the association marching two and two,
(They go to guard some corpse, the flag-tops are draped with black muslin.) (51)

As this list moves forward, Whitman drops his “I hear” in favour of the more objective “the” to begin the line, thereby widening the scene to suggest a more expansive scope. This simultaneity of events works to populate Whitman’s world with a veritable symphony of human (and, at the outset, nonhuman) activity. When the music finally falls silent at the end of this section, Whitman’s speaker categorizes the cacophonous din as essential to what we might call “Being”—what he terms, rather mysteriously, the great “puzzle of puzzles” (52). Seemingly heeding Nancy’s call to resist homogenizing a world that is full of heterogeneity, Whitman leaves us having to grapple with this “grand opera,” filled with so many varied and distinct registers. (51)

As Umberto Eco explains in *The Infinity of Lists*, lists have always been closely tied to classical rhetoric and the achievement of specific ideological aims. “Since antiquity,” he argues, “rhetoric has encompassed rhythmically enunciated and enunciable lists, in which it was less important to hint at inexhaustible quantities than to attribute properties to things in a redundant manner, often for pure love of iteration.”¹⁴ Eco would likely classify many of the lists in “Song of Myself” as forms of “*accumulations*, or, in other words, the sequence and juxtaposition of linguistic terms belonging to the same conceptual sphere,” despite the fact that Whitman’s “sphere” is consistently expanding and contracting, making it difficult to delimit (Eco 133, emphasis Eco’s). This constant change in scope, however, renders the task of classifying the poem’s lists quite challenging. Eco identifies some sub-categories of accumulations, but Whitman’s catalogues seem to frustrate them; slipping between and oscillating amongst these types:

Slightly different forms are the *incrementum* or *climax* or *gradatio*. Even though they still refer to the same conceptual field, at every step they say something more or with greater intensity (the converse procedure is *decrementum* or *anticlimax*). An example of this can be found in another oration against Catiline: ‘You can do nothing, plot nothing, imagine nothing, that not only will I understand it, but even if I do not see it, I will penetrate it in depth, I will sense it.’ (136-137, emphasis Eco’s)

The narrative of gradation Eco identifies does not conform to Whitman’s catalogues, which in one moment will appear to swell and enlarge themselves, only to shrink and decrease the next, rendering determinations of scale and importance very difficult to satisfy. This technique allows for an interesting kind of equanimity between members, however, and it is ultimately why Whitman is able to convince us that

. . . a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand and the egg of the wren,
And the tree-toad is a chef-d’oeuvre for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,
And the cow crunching with depress’d head surpasses any statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels. (53-54)

The rhetorical move Whitman’s catalogues successfully make, then, is to allow the very small and the very large, the infinitesimal and infinite, to not only coexist, but to be coextensive with one another. The tree toad isn’t just *as important as* a chef-d’oeuvre, it literally holds that “highest” position, thereby enacting the radical malleability between classes and things and persons for which the American democratic ideal can only optimistically reach.

The Declaration of Independence, a document that begins with a long list of abuses committed by King George III against his American colonies, promises to not just separate one group of people from another, but to dissolve the singular into the plural and “unanimously” unite the desires and values of the “thirteen States of America.”¹⁵ This document marks these “Free and Independent States” as “assembled,” and each agrees, in unison, to “mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” A short eleven years later, the United States Constitution would solidify this plurality: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States

of America.”¹⁶ These documents valorize the plural in a rhetorical attempt to suture a sense of national unity to the very nascent beginnings of the America Whitman will later poetically represent. But for all of this historical focus on maintaining the ideals of individual freedom and independence in the face of this unification, there are many in America for whom these founding documents still refuse to speak. Whitman’s representational commitment to constantly move between the general and the particular, then—to dramatically oscillate between the one and the many—enacts a refusal to participate wholly in the homogenizing ideal that these documents attempt to manifest.

As Nancy emphasizes, the problem of how to articulate communal bonds without erasing individual identity has long troubled philosophers and political theorists alike. “The philosophical politics and political philosophy,” he writes,

regularly run aground on the essence of community or community as origin. Rousseau and Marx are exemplary in their struggle with these obstacles. Rousseau revealed the aporia of a community that would have to precede itself in order to constitute itself: in its very concept, the “social contract” is the denial or foreclosure of the originary division [*deliaison*] between those singularities that would have to agree to the contract and, thereby, “draw it to a close.” Although assuredly more radical in his demand for the dissolution of politics in all spheres of existence (which is the “realization of philosophy”), Marx ignores that the separation between singularities overcome and suppressed in this way is not, in fact, an accidental separation imposed by “political” authority, but rather the constitutive separation of dis-position. However powerful it is for thinking the “real relation” and what we call the “individual,” “communism” was still not able to think being-in-common as distinct from community. (24)

It is in its refusal to land squarely on either side of the community/individual divide that “Song of Myself” marks itself as a peculiarly radical poetic offering. Whitman populates his world with groupings that enact Nancy’s “being-in-common” simply by retaining and celebrating the power of singularity amidst the unapologetic pull of the poem’s crowded, vibrant masses. “(Round and round we go, all of us, and ever come back thither),” Whitman’s speaker whispers, surrounding his voice in parentheses like the “callous shell” of the “quahaug,” enacting the liberation that constitutes and sustains this most singular, this most plural of texts (52).

University of Winnipeg

NOTES

- 1 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891–1892), 29–79. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.
- 2 Quoted in Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": A Mosaic of Interpretations* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 141.
- 3 Lawrence Buell, "Transcendentalist Catalogue Rhetoric: Vision Versus Form," *American Literature* 40 (November 1968), 325–339.
- 4 Robert E. Belknap, *The List: The Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
- 5 Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 6 Thomas Jefferson, The Declaration of Independence, from *The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson, 1743–1790*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 35–42.
- 7 See for example Ed Folsom's discussion of Whitman's problematic stance on the enfranchisement of Black Americans after the Civil War in "Erasing Race: The Lost Black Presence in Whitman's Manuscripts," in Ivy Wilson, ed., *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 3–31.
- 8 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Shorter 9th Edition. Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1865*, ed. Robert S. Levine et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 596–613.
- 9 Gunter Leypoldt, "Democracy's 'Lawless Music': The Whitmanian Moment in the U.S. Construction of Representative Literariness," *New Literary History* 38 (Spring 2007), 333–352.
- 10 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 183.
- 11 Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 77. (Emphasis is Derrida's.)
- 12 For more on Heidegger's connection to National Socialism, see Victor Fairas, *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1991), and Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
- 13 Michael Cobb, *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 15, 24–26.
- 14 Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists: An Illustrated Essay* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009).
- 15 "The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, accessed November 10, 2014.
- 16 "The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription," U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, accessed November 10, 2014.