

WHITMAN'S AGING BODY

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CONSIDERING THE ENERGY scholars have devoted to the early stages of Whitman's career, beginning with the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and culminating with the poems he wrote during and soon after the Civil War, it seems remarkable that his late poetry has inspired so little interest. As he aged, critics typically (and dismissively) observe, Whitman wrote more prose and less poetry, and many of the most engaging features of his early poems—their innovative style and their radical and coincident visions of sexuality and democracy, for example—disappear entirely. To be sure, Whitman's late poems often replace detailed depictions of American bodies and lives with political idealizations and abstract meditations on death or the past. Yet the body—a failing, aged body—remains a forceful presence in these poems, one of the most moving figures of physical decline in all of American poetry. The effects of physical decline on Whitman's poetry, furthermore, merit serious consideration. As Whitman's final poems struggle to represent bodily deterioration, they throw into sharp relief the physical and imaginative freedoms that underwrite his radical poetics of the 1850s and early 1860s.

This essay shares certain general points of emphasis with the three serious treatments of Whitman's final poems to appear in the last twenty years, essays by Donald Stauffer, Wynn Thomas, and George Hutchinson.¹ Like them, I concentrate on placing Whitman's last poems within the larger context of his career and on reading these poems biographically, as meditations on the experience of aging. Both Stauffer and Thomas, however, are much more invested than I in judgements of intrinsic poetic value, in determining which of the late poems are "good" or "great" enough to strengthen Whitman's literary reputation. Meanwhile, Hutchinson's strict insistence on the constructed nature of identities (literary or otherwise) belies my desire to read Whitman's final lyrics as direct though troubled attempts to represent the lived experience of bodily deterioration.

My biographical approach also seeks to add a political dimension missing from previous readings of these poems. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry meditates in brilliant and moving prose on "the utter rigidity of pain itself." "Its resis-

tance to language,” she writes, “is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is.”² My treatment of the aging Whitman echoes Scarry’s insistence on the inherent difficulty of representing pain and on the political and ethical importance of striving to articulate for others that which—like pain—seeks to resist or destroy language. While Scarry concentrates on the pain humans cause one another in war and through torture, we can usefully apply her ideas to the pain of aging and its capacity to resist poetic description. There is a double political imperative here: to explore one of our relatively few literary representations of pain, and to listen to a particular description of aging, a subject our culture too often ignores.

It is impossible to ignore this subject when reading the short poems Whitman published for the first time in the last five years of his life, poems he collected in “Sands at Seventy” and “Good-Bye My Fancy.” In early June of 1888—“Sands at Seventy” was published that fall and “Good-Bye My Fancy” in 1891—Whitman barely withstood a series of strokes and his death seemed imminent. From then until his death in March of 1892, he was confined to a wheelchair and in constant discomfort because of, among other ailments, a failing bladder and chronic constipation. Whitman had suffered from serious hypertension since the Civil War, leading to frequent headaches and dizzy spells, and he had weathered two previous strokes, the first in 1873 and the second in 1875. It was not until the late 1880s, however, that his failing health changed from a subject of serious but sporadic concern to an intense and nearly constant source of anxiety and aggravation.

This essay examines two crucial modes—one of presence, one of absence—in which Whitman’s final poems represent his physical decline. Beginning with those poems that offer direct treatment of the aging body, I consider the striking differences between Whitman’s treatment of physical experience in his early poems and in poems written in the last five years of his life. While the body exists early in his career as *the* privileged site of sympathy and sensual contact between poet and reader, physical experience in later poems becomes the very thing Whitman feels least able to communicate. This initial difference leads me to consider a second and more sweeping change Whitman’s poetics undergo in his final years, the shift in his late poetry from metonymic to metaphorical language. Though Whitman’s most moving and thought-provoking late poems are those that confront directly “[t]he body wreck’d, old, poor and paralyzed,” his last abstract and emblematic lyrics speak to us of physical decline.³ The absence in these lyrics of the concrete and material details that once typified Whitman’s work speaks to us of pain’s power to alter language he had previously controlled.

My frequent leaps between the 1850s and the late 1880s will trouble readers who feel that we can better understand the effects of Whitman’s ill health in the late 1880s if we compare his final poems to those he

wrote in, say, the 1870s. This essay does not seek, however, to provide a full, step-by-step narrative of Whitman's physical decline and its effects on his poetry from the Civil War forward. Rather, its goal is to allow us to experience most effectively the bodily presence and stylistic absences that signify physical decline in Whitman's late verse, while at the same time calling attention to the physical integrity and freedom of movement upon which Whitman's early poetry depends, and which we as readers too often take for granted.

For both M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Michael Moon, two inspired readers of political potential in the sexual charge of Whitman's lines, his career as a "poet of the body" ends with the Civil War.⁴ Yet consider the poem "As I Sit Writing Here," first published in the *New York Herald* about three weeks before the strokes of 1888 and later included in "Sands at Seventy." Though this poem may not challenge the discourses that governed sexual relations in the late 1880s, the body here is hardly absent:

As I sit writing here, sick and grown old,
Not the least burden is that dulness of the years, querilities,
Ungracious glooms, aches, lethargy, constipation, whimpering *ennui*,
May filter in my daily songs. (*LG Var*, 3:698)

This catalogue of existential and physical "burdens" stands in stark contrast to the vibrantly sensual catalogues one finds with such frequency in Whitman's early poems. Likewise, we find no attempt in "As I Sit" to recreate that impression of magical contact between reader and poet that so unforgettably enlivens Whitman's early verse. Rather than engaging in an intimate dialogue with the reader, one accompanied by representations of reader-poet bodily contact, this poem adopts a kind of alienated tone. The body is figured as that which the poet hopes to exclude from his "songs," and Whitman's readers, though interpellated by his confession, are not addressed directly.

Part of this poem's power, then, resides in the reality that its author, beset by physical discomfort and depression, can no longer offer his readers the radical, sensual exchange he once could. "As I Sit" presents a short description of Whitman's physical and psychological ailments, a description heightened by the absence of many of his most effective poetic devices. Whitman's book no longer stands for his body in this poem: we are far from the daring metonymy of "So Long," which assures readers of *Leaves of Grass* that "this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man" (*LG Var*, 2:452). We are decades removed as well from the limitless physical energy of Section 9 of "I Sing the Body Elec-

tric" (with its "Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears, / Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows, and the waking or sleeping of the lids," and so forth), where body parts flow on for more than a page (*LG Var*, 1:131); "As I Sit" comprises only four lines. In "I Sing the Body Electric," the seemingly endless and heavily punctuated lines demand to be read quickly and leave us breathless. In "As I Sit," the heavy punctuation of the third line has the opposite effect: we read slowly, feeling the difficulty of each stroke of the pen, of each movement undertaken by this aching body.

We do not have to compare "As I Sit" to Whitman's early poems of the body, however, for it to interest and affect us. It attempts to describe the modulations and frustrations of physical pain with a directness rarely encountered in literature; it confronts the lived experience of aging with an honesty our culture rarely sanctions. "As I Sit" is a brief meditation on the present tense of composition for a poet "sick and grown old." He gestures towards other burdens in the poem (financial, perhaps, or familial) but never explains this larger context, stopping instead after a short catalogue of those immediate pains that he hopes will remain absent from his daily songs. "Ungracious glooms, aches, lethargy, constipation, whimpering *ennui*," he writes, suggesting the difficulty of separating more abstract and psychological experiences of "glooms" and "*ennui*" from more physical experiences like "lethargy," "aches," and "constipation." Whitman's diction reminds us how fully our descriptions of pain depend upon general terms, like "aches" and "lethargy," or words that designate a bodily condition, like "constipation," without referring to the specific pain this condition causes. Yet even as it reminds us of pain's capacity to elude exact description, this poem brings us closer to pain than we are accustomed to dwelling, making it almost concrete and certainly memorable. When have we encountered "constipation" in a lyric before or since?

Germane here is Scarry's suggestion that, while "having pain" can often "come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty,'" our experiences of "hearing about pain" may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to have doubt.'⁵ In other words, while we are fundamentally certain of our own pain, perhaps nothing seems more worthy of skepticism than another person's complaint about a pain whose existence we can, obviously, never verify. Even if that person's screams and his doctor's expertise attest to the likelihood of his pain, in the end we must take its existence on faith. Likewise, when we feel pain we are perfectly conscious of the doubt others are likely to experience as we describe our pain to them—an isolating, alienating consciousness that only increases our discomfort.

This notion of pain's relationship to our conceptions of certainty and doubt suggests one way to understand the alienation expressed in "As I Sit." David Reynolds remarks somewhat cynically that "As I Sit"

shows us Whitman “advertising his illness even while pretending to suppress it.”⁶ Scarry’s observations, however, suggest that “to advertise” and “to pretend” do not accurately describe Whitman’s rhetorical action. Though his own pain may define “certainty” for Whitman, he is conscious that his readers can never feel it as he does, and the “doubt” he imagines on the part of his readers only increases his discomfort. Even while he struggles to describe his pain in terms that others might understand, he states his more general intention to suppress such difficult subject matter, which he fears can never help constitute the sort of sanguine and communicative verse his readers have come to expect from him.

The intimate connection Scarry finds between pain and epistemology is supported by a note accompanying two more poems from “Sands at Seventy”—“An Evening Lull” and “Now Precedent Songs Farewell.” Apparently written just weeks (if not days) after his strokes of 1888, this note reminds us again how fully the pain of old age, when it struck most forcefully, could destroy the project of sympathy once so essential to Whitman’s art:

The two songs on this page are eked out during an afternoon, June, 1888, in my seventieth year, at a critical spell of illness. Of course no reader and probably no human being at any time will ever have such phases of emotional and solemn action as these involve to me. I feel in them an end and close of all. (*LG Var*, 3:729)

Because Whitman’s early poetry hinges so powerfully on his confidence that he can both absorb the experiences of others and communicate his own experience to his readers, the skepticism he voices here seems shocking. The separations of time, place, and distance that the speaker of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” overcomes with such definite swiftness, for instance, uniting men and women of generations past and present through a sharing of perceptual experience, are now trumped by a more stubborn separation: the separation between those who know physical pain as “certainty” and all other readers and human beings who, Whitman seems sure, will experience the description of this pain as “doubt.” His pain, I’m suggesting, destroyed much of the most personal language once available to Whitman. As it destroyed his perception of his own body as healthy and virile, it cracked his confidence in the discursive structure—that of sensual sharing through poems, of direct communication between poet and reader—he once depended upon. As it anchored him firmly to a single, “seated shape,” pain destroyed his imaginative capacity to occupy every body and thus no single body (*LG Var*, 3:748). The author of “As I Sit” occupies only one body, a body whose weakness almost consumes him.

Of all “psychic, somatic, and perceptual states,” Scarry writes, pain “makes the most pressing urge to move out and away from the body.”⁷ What happens to the poet of the body, then, when his body is in pain? What happens when physical decline makes it impossible for Whitman to recreate his former, sensual poetic presence, when direct contemplation of his own body leads not to communication but to alienation? Writing that the “metonymic verve of [Whitman’s] poetry slackens” after the Civil War, C. Carroll Hollis offers one important answer to these questions.⁸ Examining the shift in Whitman’s poetry from metonymic to metaphoric language allows us to consider further the ways in which Whitman’s late poems represent his aging body not just thematically but stylistically. Their direct references to the aged body make poems like “As I Sit Writing Here,” “An Evening Lull,” “A Carol Closing Sixty-Nine,” “Queries to My Seventieth Year,” and “Of That Blithe Throat of Mine” exceptions among Whitman’s late poems, “realistic” reminders of physical discomfort. Much more frequently in the late poems, pain signifies either metaphorically or through its absence.

“The Dismantled Ship,” first published in February 1888 and later included in “Sands at Seventy,” exemplifies the figurative mode Whitman often enters when representing physical decline in his late poems. It does not avoid physical decline entirely, as the most abstract and bodiless of these poems seem to, but instead treats it metaphorically:

In some unused lagoon, some nameless bay,
 On sluggish, lonesome waters, anchor’d near the shore,
 An old, dismantled, gray and batter’d ship, disabled, done,
 After free voyages to all the seas of the earth, haul’d up at last and hawser’d tight,
 Lies rusting, mouldering. (*LG Var*, 3:727)

One feels that Whitman’s first instinct, even as he presents this imaginary scene, is metonymic. He characterizes the ship primarily by listing and describing objects contiguous to it, things one might ordinarily associate with a ship. The first two lines describe surroundings, and parts of the ship—its anchor, hawser, and its missing mast—are scattered throughout the poem. Like so many of Whitman’s late lyrics, however, “The Dismantled Ship” frames metonymic detail within one central metaphor. As Thomas suggests, this poem relies upon the reader’s understanding that the ship represents the aged poet’s physical and existential condition.

There are notable similarities between “As I Sit Writing Here” and “The Dismantled Ship.” Both poems take only one sentence to evoke the experience of aging; both are defined by the implied temporality of present participles. The extended present of “writing” in “As I Sit” allows the aches and glooms of the writer to seep slowly into our heads, while the seemingly endless “rusting, mouldering” of its final line domi-

nates the "The Dismantled Ship." Both poems emphasize lack of motion on the part of their central figures, the sitting poet and the boat that lies rusting, and both poems emphasize the psychological and physical weight of this stationary extended present.

Despite these formal similarities, the overarching metaphor of "The Dismantled Ship" constitutes a crucial difference between these two poems, a difference lovers of Whitman's early verse tend to criticize. One can fault Whitman for packaging his pain and immobility in this fairly conventional, nautical metaphor, thus perhaps making discomfort more palatable to his readers than does "As I Sit," for example. Furthermore, one might add, such metaphorical trappings trivialize the real physical suffering that motivates "The Dismantled Ship." Yet Whitman's body, I would argue, does lurk behind this metaphor, its suffering expressed by its absence. His failure to represent his pain in explicit and literal terms ultimately serves to remind us of pain's power to erase the poet's former vocabulary of bodily experience. Metaphor is what remains when the poet of the body decides (as he seems to have decided in "As I Sit" and in his skeptical note to "An Evening Lull") that he can no longer treat bodily experience as a source of optimism and a site of successful communication.

But there are less abstract ways to describe absences in "The Dismantled Ship." Many of the most strikingly metonymic moments in Whitman's early poetry depend upon the poet's presence in the streets, in the countryside, on the decks of ferries: places that provide direct contact with the social and historical realities his poems depict. As Hollis rightly suggests, Whitman's predilection for metonymy early in his career "presupposes a mind fascinated with and glorying in the realistic details of American life."⁹ The language of "The Dismantled Ship" reminds us that, regardless of Whitman's natural fascinations, bodily deterioration made such details inaccessible. He can no longer stand at fords and watch horsemen cross, nor can he walk through the streets observing American laborers. The elderly Whitman is chair-bound and thus chained to memories of detail and to metaphor; the only effectively "realistic" moments among the late poems are catalogues of his own ailments. When the late poems depicting public events do offer details—for example, the "temples, towers, goods, machines and ores" of "Bravo, Paris Exposition!"—the details are flat and abstract, lacking the energy and particularity that result in earlier poems, where the poet seems present as a witness (*LG Var*, 3:738).

Whitman's final poems—perhaps even more powerfully than his first—remind us what a gift is good health, and what wonders accrue to those who can move freely through the world. Through both literal and stylistic representations of bodily failure, these poems reveal how thoroughly Whitman's early poems depend upon a self-image of physical

vitality and on a freedom of movement available to all Americans neither now nor then.

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NOTES

This essay is dedicated, with love and respect, to Chris Holmlund and Wilhelmina Lee.

1 Donald Barlow Stauffer, "Walt Whitman and Old Age," *Walt Whitman Review* 24 (1978), 142-148; M. Wynn Thomas, "A Study of Walt Whitman's Late Poetry," *Walt Whitman Review* 27 (1981), 3-14; George B. Hutchinson, "'The Laughing Philosopher': Whitman's Comic Repose," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 6 (Spring 1989), 172-188.

2 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5.

3 *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, Arthur Golden, and William White (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 3:697. Subsequent references to *Leaves of Grass* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.

4 M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics, and the Text* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 44; Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 221.

5 Scarry, 4. See also 7 and 13-4.

6 David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 565.

7 Scarry, 161-162.

8 C. Carroll Hollis, *Language and Style in Leaves of Grass* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 181.

9 Hollis, 160.