# WALT WHITMAN
## QUARTERLY REVIEW

VOLUME FORTY NUMBERS ONE AND TWO SUMMER/FALL 2022

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Front Cover: Facsimile of the frontispiece of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* / Courtesy of the Special Collections Department, The University of Iowa Libraries.

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# TWO RESPLENDENT SUNS: DANTE ALIGHIERI AND WALT WHITMAN

GARY SCHMIDGALL

## *Introduction*

There is good reason to feel trepidation about offering a comprehensive attempt to align the masterpieces, lives, and legacies of Dante Alighieri and Walt Whitman—the task I have set for myself here. It is a trepidation similar to what Dante's pilgrim feels when he sees these puzzling words inscribed over the portal to Hell: Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'entrate.

There are, first of all, the many more-than-hints of the tenuousness of the connection between their central lifeworks, the *Commedia* and *Leaves of Grass*, produced over decades. The editor of Whitman's unpublished notes and manuscripts summed up that his interest in Dante "was moderate at best, and his reading apparently did not go beyond the *Inferno*" (*Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, hereafter *NUPM*, 5:1861). In a specifically dated manuscript, Whitman records, "Spring '59—read Dante's 'Inferno'" and then he offers a most generic summary: "It is one of those works (unlike the Homeric and Shaksperian) that makes an intense impression on the susceptibilities of an age . . . to absorb it, and be mastered by its strength." Toward the end, he adds, "Dante's other principle work, the Paradiso, I have not read," though he does note that it features Beatrice, "a pure and beautiful woman" who "conducted him through heaven—as Virgil conducted him through Hell. Probably he does not succeed so well in giving heavenly pictures." Whitman refers to Dante's Virgil just once and fleetingly: "Nor shades of Virgil and Dante" (*Leaves of Grass,* hereafter *LG 1892* "deathbed" edition, available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*, 158), but even here he gets it wrong: only the former is a shade, the pilgrim inhabits a real body—the souls in Hell often notice this. As for the other canticle of the *Comedy*, Whitman seems never to have read *Purgatorio*.

In the same manuscript, Walt makes his only allusion to a specific plot point in the *Comedy*. It is introduced just after Whitman refers in the 1859 manuscript to "the vulgar and extremely coarsely rank pattern of Hell."[1] The passage mentioned there occurs among the betrayers of *Inferno*'s Ninth Circle where, Walt writes, "two brothers that have hated each other and murdered each other are made to continually 'butt' each other by their heads, steeped in mud, ice, filth." This passage is Dante's reference to Alessandro and Napoleone degli Alberti, two brothers who killed each other around 1285—when Dante was twenty—in a fight over the inheritance from their father (*The Divine Comedy*, Allen Mandelbaum, *Inferno*, hereafter In, 32:39-40). It is easy to imagine why this dramatic historical tidbit would have caught the eye of the eager poet of Comradery.

Throughout Whitman's reading life, there is scant evidence that he ever read deeply or thoughtfully the poetry of prior—or even contemporary—poets. Typical is this report from an 1885 interview in which Whitman was asked about Dante: "He read the *Divine Comedy* in [John] Carlyle's translation and in Longfellow's, but he could not quite understand Dante's great position among poets and in the history of Italy. 'But I feel sure . . . that the trouble is with me. I haven't got the right clew. If I knew more it would be clear to me.'" In a short 1937 essay on "Walt Whitman's Reading of Dante," Joseph Mathews included that remark and reminded readers that Richard Maurice Bucke had observed in his 1883 Whitman biography that he had "no language but English."[2] He also brings in this exchange that occurred after Horace Traubel said to Whitman, "I will be honest. I don't care much for Milton or Dante." The poet laughed and replied, "I'll be honest too. I don't care much for them either, I like the moderns better."[3]

But there are passages elsewhere in Whitman's conversations that give decided hope to those with Dantist inclinations. Among the "detached sayings" included by Traubel in his transcriptions is this one: "I believe in the eligibility of the human soul for all perfect things." What could be more redolent of *Paradiso* than this optimistic conviction? Walt then immediately adds, "all the 'great phrases' in history are no doubt fictions" and then succeeds in reminding us of the beatific smile of Beatrice radiating through *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*: "There's a beautiful woman: she is not beautiful alone . . . but because of a certain unity, atmosphere, a certain balance of light and shade, which accounts for every detail" (*With Walt Whitman in Camden*, hereafter *WWWC*, available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*, 1:107).

Another strong Dantean connection among Whitman's admirers was J. A. Symonds, who published in 1872 *An Introduction to the Study of Dante*; Symonds sent him a copy and soon became a much-admired Whitman correspondent over a stretch of two decades. When Symonds sent a new edition of the Dante *Introduction* in 1890, Whitman said, "An alluring book: personal, strong—a bit out of John's own big heart."[4] An earlier gift from Symonds of a reproduction of the Giotto portrait of Dante set off this train of thought: "The face is wonderfully clean-cut, the face of a man who was quits with the impurities of life. To get that in a face much has to be lost as well as won." A trenchant view, given what Dante lost in exile and won in writing the *Comedy*. Walt adds later, "the Dantesque sort of man is vital, must be reckoned with, stands in this thing or that for the supreme ideals."[5]

A year or so later, Dante gets a new summary from Walt, shying away

from the notion that Dante was "the greatest poet that ever lived." "[T]he statement is not conclusive," though he will grant that Dante's *Comedy* was "the serenest—the most earnest" book ever written. After acknowledging his high place, Walt asserts: "The translations have been many, and, curiously, all good ones—remarkably good ones, too. I know them all—Longfellow's well. But it seems to me that greatest among them—indispensably so—is John Carlyle's" (*WWWC* 4:74-75). A few other redolent hints for Whitmanic Dantisti are scattered hither and yon. One is the fond reminiscence of his eclectic youthful *al fresco* reading "down in the country, or to Long Island's seashores." His reading list included Homer, Shakespeare, Ossian, and other masterpieces, "Dante's among them." This, he aptly adds, was read "mostly in an old wood."[6] Dante is also mentioned as among those who helped Whitman "penetrate the inmost lore of poets" and rendered him able to "diagnose the shifting-delicate tints of love and pride and doubt—to truly understand" ("To Get the Final Lilt of Songs" *LG 1892*, 394). Love, pride, and doubt—as we shall see later—are crucial clues to understanding Dante's *Comedy*. Another very late poem, "Old Chants" (*LG 1892*, 414), reminisces nostalgically about his early reading and also mentions Dante's among "the elder ballads." He sums all the "bye-gone ballads, feudal tales" as offering "some vast wondrous weird dream-presences, / The great shadowy groups gathering around." Those "dream-presences" and "shadowy groups" quite literally adumbrate Dante's *Comedy*.

All of this hints at the presence of what I perceive to be a deep affinity between Alighieri and Whitman—an affinity that has autobiographical, aesthetic, philosophical, political, and even cosmological dimensions. Some years ago, apropos the affinities I saw between Whitman and William Blake as visionary poets, I quoted this passage from Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (1643): "Men are lived over again; the world is now as it was in ages past. There was none then but there that hath been someone since that parallels him, and is, as it were, his revived self."[7] The view applies, perhaps more emphatically, to the visionary poets Dante Alighieri and Walt Whitman; what follows will lay out my reasons for thinking so. In many ways, Whitman was Dante's revived self. There is no entry on Dante in the *Walt Whitman Encyclopedia*, and clearly there should be. Also, in his 2014 essay dilating on Dante's influence on the *Drum-Taps* poems, Joshua Matthews happens to note in passing that "the comparisons between the two poets have never been given a thorough treatment"—another reason to embark on this journey of discovery.[8]

In his famous July 1855 letter to Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson gallantly praised *Leaves of Grass* as "the beginning of a great career" and spec-

ulated that the volume "must have had a long foreground somewhere" (*CRE* 730). Though an admirer of Dante—he translated his *Vita Nuova*—Emerson might not have imagined that this foreground could extend all the way back to the *Comedy*. But there was an unwitting hint that it did in a line from the poem "Song of Prudence," which first appeared in the 1856 *Leaves*, where Walt cheekily reproduced a line from the Emerson letter, without permission, as a lavish cover blurb: "No consummation exists without being from some long previous consummation" (*CRE* 375). The following pages will make clear why I think *Leaves of Grass* and the *Comedy* fit perfectly into this assertion.

Thinking about Horace Traubel's busy efforts to record the conversations and facts of Walt's life for posterity, the poet observed in the fall of 1890: "I know how, after a man disappears, the mists begin to gather, then fallacy of one degree or another, then utter myth, irresistibly mystifying everything. It is a lamentable twist in history" (*WWWC* 7:139). Dante has, to a large extent, disappeared in the mists of time—Walt rather less so—but since the *Comedy* and *Leaves of Grass* are still very much alive, we owe it to these "two resplendent suns" (*LG 1892*, 93) to explore how they illuminated the human condition in astonishingly similar ways. Not to do so would also be a lamentable twist.

## *Nel mezzo del cammin: Career Arc and Autobiography*

The spinal element of our two poets' masterworks is their own real, historical selves. What Whitman asserts toward the end of his valedictory poem, "*So Long!*"—"Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man" (*LG 1892*, 382)—also applies to the *Comedy*. A frequent authorial presence is felt in their verse, sometimes blatant, but often veiled or disguised. One of Dante's most astute recent biographers has said Dante "was never slow to be autobiographical," and he makes clear this is why the *Comedy* so rivets its reader.[9] Whitman revealed he knew the electric quality of autobiography when Traubel happened to say "autobiography is the only real biography" and Walt added his amen: "It's absorbingly interesting."[10] Walt also agreed with his friend Richard Maurice Bucke that the "autobiographicality" of *Leaves* made an actual one superfluous, which led Walt to say he "realized a sense in which the book is deeply personal . . . the statement of a life" (*WWWC* 3:343).

Mid-life crises and very dark woods loomed large for both poets. For Dante, the date can be very specifically fixed on his *cammin*: 10 March 1302—or the thirty-seventh of his fifty-six years. This was the day he was sentenced

to death by Florence, a punishment Dante—and later historians—blamed principally on Pope Boniface VIII. Cruelly, Boniface was to die just a year later. This led, in due course, to two decades of dislocation, deprivation, and exile. But it also spurred him to create the *Comedy*, into which he poured much of his heart, soul, personality, and philosophy. Boccaccio, in the first, sixty-page biographical sketch of Dante, argued that an outsider's perspective filled the *Comedy*: Florence was then "wickedly divided into two parties" and Dante was "violently forced into irrevocable banishment by that very Rumor which had formerly been heard many times lifting his praise to the stars."[11] Those stars would haunt Dante.

Whitman's pivotal, mid-life-altering moment cannot be so precisely dated or explained. It must have occurred between 1853 and 1859—or somewhere in the thirty-fifth to fortieth of his seventy-two years. It is clear in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves* that Whitman felt as disengaged from the culture of These States as Dante was from Florence. The opening images—of a snake's sloughed skin that "still sticks to opinions and manners and literature" or of "the corpse . . . slowly borne" out of a home—show his revulsion at the *status quo* (5). The greatest American poet—Whitman himself, of course—will now present "superior models" and perform a visionary task that epitomizes the entire action of the *Comedy*'s first canticle: "He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet" (vi). Some have also speculated that a private search for the right camerado to love was beginning to animate or frustrate him during this crucial time, spurring him to compose the early *Leaves* editions, especially the finest, most capacious one of 1860.

Both Dante and Walt—let us be on a first-name basis with the two—experienced decades of viewing their worlds from an outlier's perspective. Boccaccio said Dante addressed himself to a culture in which "good men are exiled, crushed, and humiliated," and even alludes to Italy as being a ship ill-helmed by the powerful: "let those consider who turn the steering-wheel of this ship, for we of the humbler class are tossed around on the stormy tide of fortune as they are" (*Life*, 4). This will remind us of Whitman's remark that liberty is ill-served when men of "good intent" feel "the sharp show of the tushes [tusks] of power."[12] The essence of any outlier's *modus operandi* is summed up in this advice in the 1855 preface: "examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul" (vi). There is perhaps no poem in *Leaves* that expresses an outlier's political instincts more succinctly than a short one that started life titled "Walt Whitman's Caution":

> . . . *Resist much, obey little,*
> Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved,
> Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city of this earth,
> ever afterward resumes its liberty. (*LG 1860*, 401)[13]

In one of his many soul-driven poems, Whitman urges his reader, "Recall the ever-welcome defiers" ("Think of the Soul" *LG 1867, 285*), and both poets certainly were defiant outliers.

Dante's ego-assaulting fall from Florentine grace energizes the *Comedy*, perhaps most poignantly in Canto 25 of *Paradiso*, where the poet contemplates the Florentine republic giving the heroic author of "this sacred poem" a laurel crown and his return to "the fair fold where I slept, a lamb opposed to wolves" (*The Divine Comedy*, Allen Mandelbaum, *Paradiso,* hereafter Pa-; 15:61-63; 25:1-9). Whitman imagines a similar triumphant advent for America's "greatest poet" in his 1855 preface, and the enemies he skewers are very much like Dante's ruthless Florentine political foes and the city's vicious factional strife: "the swarms of cringers, suckers, doughfaces, lice of politics, planners of sly involutions for their own preferment to city offices or state legislatures" (vii).[14] And Walt, like Dante, speaks always for the *demos*, the humbler citizen; he hates it "when it is better to be a bound booby and rogue in office at a high salary than the poorest free mechanic or farmer with his hat unmoved from his head" (vii).

Dante and Walt also opted out of the materialistic rat race. Boccaccio said that Dante could have followed his father into the comfortable burgher life of a notary but chose not to: "he did not pass on to lucrative studies, which almost everyone is seeking today, but his admirable aspiration for perpetual glory made him scorn ephemeral wealth" (*Life*, 4). And in *Paradiso,* Dante makes fun of those who get mired in pursuit of such mundane comfort and riches:

> O senseless cares of mortals, how deceiving
> are syllogistic reasonings that bring
> your wings to flight so low, to earthly things!
> . . . one was set on priesthood
> and one, through force or fraud, on rulership;
> one meant to plunder, one to politick;
> one labored, tangled in delights of flesh . . . (Pa11:1-8)

Many are Walt's attacks on such immoral striving for wealth and possessions. At the outset, in the 1855 preface, he shows his disgust at "the toss and pallor of years of moneymaking with all their scorching days and icy nights and all their stifling deceits and underhanded dodgings, or infinitessimals of parlors,

or shameless stuffing while others starve" (x). Dante makes a similar point when he asks this rhetorical question in *Purgatorio*: "How can a good that's shared by more possessors / enable each to be more rich in it / than if that good had been possessed by a few?" (*The Divine Comedy*, Allen Mandelbaum, *Purgatorio*, hereafter Pu-; 15:61-63).[15] Whitman's grandest answer to that question, which is the same as Dante's, was his one extended prose political tract, *Democratic Vistas* (1871), a fierce Juvenalian screed on the moral, political, and cultural bankruptcy of post-Civil War America. Just as Dante romanticized the culture of Florence before it devolved into a city that could ostracize an already-famous poet, so does Walt lay out a serious fall from the original Founders' grace: "The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ'd in," and he adds, "It is as if we were somehow being endow'd with a vast and more thoroughly-appointed body, and left with little or no soul" (11). In just the same fashion, Dante the pilgrim is greeted by three Florentines dressed like "one in our own degenerate city" (In16:7). Florence, we learn in *Paradiso*, originally was "sober and chaste" and lived in "tranquillity." Sounding very much the note of *Democratic Vistas*, Dante adds that Florence then was *not* focused on jewelry or "embroidered gowns" or on the worries about the dowry costs of marrying off daughters, no degenerate Sardanapalus coming "to teach in the bedchamber" (Pa15:99-108).

Dante and Walt eventually came, by the middle of their *cammin*, to the point when—in good Aristotelian fashion—they believed it was legitimate to question everything. There was a decided element of *oltraggio*—Italian for "outrage"—in both poets. Dante uses the word and translators render it variously as "gross discourtesy," "excess," and "injury." He outraged many establishment sensibilities of his day, and he reaped the whirlwind. Within a few years of his death, a Dominican friar published a scathing attack on the *Comedy*—and also on his treatise *De Monarchia*, which argued against Papal power—calling them vessels of demonic poison because they set up human reason as sufficient to establish truths independent of religious authority. This may be why Dante consigned Ulysses, an avatar of intellectual freedom and heroic, risky truth-seeking, to his Hell. Whitman suffered from similar contumely. He reminisced late in life, "I was not only not popular (and am not popular yet—never will be) but I was *non grata*—I was not welcome in the world" (*WWWC* 3:467).[16]

Our two poets responded to these sometimes ferocious assaults by mustering a formidable self-reliance. A. N. Wilson has suggested that Dante's *Comedy* answers a central question posed by modern life: "How can one be a private person in a common culture? Or putting it another way, what happens to the common culture when it no longer relates to what is going on inside the

heads of individual men, women, and children?" (*Dante in Love*, 341). Dante's long exile gave him much time to confront this profound disconnect, and Walt faced a similar one in mid-nineteenth-century America. The result was *Leaves of Grass*, an attempt of a private person to renew a common culture. Or, as Whitman announces in his 1855 preface, America "has passed into the new life of the new forms" (iii). In "To You," he made clear his desire would be to instill an outlier's perspective in his reader: "I only am he who places over you no master, owner, better, God, beyond what waits intrinsically in yourself" (*LG 1892*, 186).[17] Dante and Walt, in other words, were devout libertarians.

Dante is famed for asserting the centrality of his own personality—body and soul—in making sense of the vicissitudes of life. That this will be a personal dark journey is soon made explicit near the beginning of *Inferno*: as dusk approaches, the pilgrim says, "I alone was preparing for war / To struggle with my journey" (In2:3-4 Pinsky). Dante's Italian for "I alone" is *io sol uno* and this phrasing reminds one of a passage near the beginning of "Song of Myself" that underlines what is *really* personal after describing the "dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues" of his ordinary life:

> But they are not the Me myself.
> Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
> Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary . . . (*LG 1892*, 32)

"O soul, thou actual Me" (*LG 1892*, 321), Walt exhilarates later in "Passage to India," a poem that elaborately follows the cosmic journey of the poet's soul, a kind of mimicking of the pilgrim's journey in the *Comedy*. Indeed, Walt's one mention of *Paradiso* is in the context of a long, arduous journey:

> As of the far-back days the poets tell, the Paradiso,
> The straying thence, the separation long, but now
> the wandering done,
> The journey done, the journeyman come home,
> And man and art with Nature fused again. ("Proud Music of the Storm" *LG 1892*, 310)

The charisma of the self threads all through the *Comedy*; the pilgrim's personal presence and thought-processes surely account for the fascination of its narrative. The prophecy of Dante's great-grandfather Cacciaguida in *Paradiso* is pure "Song of Myself" Whitman: "your honor will / be best kept if your party is your self" (Pa17:68-69). And very near the final climax of the *Comedy*, Dante's words describing the mystery of the Trinity come out sounding almost like the gist of Walt's career-opening urge to celebrate himself:

> Eternal Light, You only dwell within
> Yourself, and only You know You; Self-knowing,
> Self-known, You love and smile upon Yourself! (Pa33:124-26)[18]

The *Comedy* in many respects published not only Dante's personal history, but also his personality. He, in effect, had followed the advice Whitman would offer centuries later in his "To a Pupil": "The greater the reform needed, the greater the Personality you need to accomplish it . . . . Rest not till you rivet and publish yourself of your own Personality" (*LG 1892*, 302). A strong *voice*, of course, is useful to this process, and Cacciaguida's prophecy for Dante includes this advice: "let your voice—bold, assured, and glad—proclaim your will and longing" (Pa15:67-68), which reminds one of Walt's early boast: "A call in the midst of the crowd,/ My own voice, orotund sweeping and final" (*LG 1892*, 68). The point is pursued more metaphorically in Walt's "Vocalism": "All waits for the right voices; / Where is the practis'd and perfect organ? where is the develop'd soul?" (*LG 1892*, 297). The answer to those rhetorical questions is: Dante and Walt. Both the *Comedy* and *Leaves* are essentially how-to works focused on inhabiting one's own self, one's own "develop'd soul." In his farewell poem, Walt says, "I announce the great individual, fluid as Nature, chaste, affectionate, compassionate, fully arm'd" ("*So Long!*" *LG 1892*, 381). Dante's poem performed the same function, to revolutionary effect in Western literature. Erich Auerbach made this point emphatically in his early Dante monograph: "Dante was the first thinker-poet since antiquity to believe in the unity of the personality, in the concordance of body and soul."[19] Both poets reflect on and reveal what Whitman called the "vehement struggle so fierce for unity in one's-self" ("Thoughts" *LG 1892*, 373).

## *Poetics for a Nation's Bard*

When Boccaccio (1313-1375) set out on his *Trattatello in Laude di Dante*, the first attempt to put Dante's life down in words, he felt obliged to explain, "I shall write in a plain and simple style, because my talents do not allow a higher one, and in our Florentine idiom, so that I will not be at discord with the style that he himself employed in the majority of his works" (*Life*, 5). Dante daringly chose vulgar Italian over respectable, learned Latin, Boccaccio says, because writing on such a serious subject as the *Comedy* deserved the widest dissemination: "he did this to make his poem more generally useful to his fellow citizens" (*Life*, 51).

If Dante aimed at the *genus humile,* he succeeded. His important early English translator John Carlyle—read by Whitman—praised "the piercing brevity and compactness" of the Dante style and also his accessible style: "The language . . . has a tone of plain familiarity . . . It is like the language of a brother."[21] T. S. Eliot famously made a similar point in his 1929 essay on Dante: "What is surprising about the poetry of Dante is that . . . it is extremely easy to read." "The simplicity of Dante" is the key for Eliot, and this extends to the allegorical method, which "makes for simplicity and intelligibility."[22] The poet James Merrill, assessing the Mandelbaum Dante translation in 1980, praised how Dante was able "virtually to invent . . . a living Italian idiom." He also said of his *terza rima* that "no verse form *moves* so wonderfully," and he follows Eliot in asserting "Dante's great virtue is his matter-of-factness." The nineteenth-century Dantist Lowell summed up his style as displaying "concise forthrightness of phrase."[23] Dante himself clearly hoped for this response to his unpretentious parlance, for he boasts of it before asking his ancestor Cacciaguida about his future in *Paradiso*: "So did I speak . . . Not with the maze of words that used to snare/ the fools upon this earth . . . but with words plain and unambiguous" (Pa17:28-34).

What is fascinating about all these assessments of the Florentine's demotic style is that Whitman's manuscripts suggest he did a little homework and came to a similar conclusion. In one manuscript dated "possibly as early as 1849"—the publication date of Carlyle's Dante translation—he jotted down: "Next to Dante Boccacio [*sic*] was the greatest contributor to the formation of the Italian language—To the former it was indebted for nerve & dignity,—to the latter for elegance wit & ease." In another manuscript Whitman specifically dated 1859, he seems to agree with Merrill's view of Dante's moving *terza rima*: "The points about the 'Inferno' . . . are *hasting on*, great vigor, a lean and muscular ruggedness, no superfluous flesh." The plainness Eliot found in Dante was also sensed by Whitman: "Mark, the simplicity of Dante—like the Bible's—different from the tangled and florid Shakespeare.— Some of his idioms in Italian must cut like a knife."[24] Carlyle's observation about Dante's "piercing brevity" is mimicked in Whitman's, "Mark, I say, his economy of words—perhaps no other writer ever equal to him." Whitman even gives a vivid, colorful synopsis of Dante's *genus humile* worthy of Boccaccio: "He narrates like some short-worded talkative superb illiterat [*sic*], an old farmer or some New England blue-light [?] minister, or common person." Even the allegorical simplicity that Eliot found in the *Comedy* is effusively remarked upon by Walt: "one simple trail of idea, epical, makes the poem—all else resolutely ignored. This alone shows the master. In this respect is the most perfect in all literature. A great study for diffuse moderns."

(all manuscript passages from *NUPM* 5:1861-63).

The point of this long excursion on Dante's accessible style is that it is substantially like the "common person" speech of *Leaves*. Whitman called for a race of "orbic bards," but he wanted an appropriate parlance for them: "one common orbic language, / One common indivisible destiny for all" ("Song of the Exposition" *LG 1892*, 157). That is, the language of *risorgimento*, the political movement that at long last united Italy in the nineteenth century. Whitman promised from his debut to use "words simple as grass" (*LG 1892*, 163). His "thoughts" would be couched in language like "the common air that bathes the globe" (*LG 1892*, 43); his America would be a place "Where no monuments exist to heroes but in the common words and deeds" (*LG 1892*, 152). Underlying this emphasis on the common man's language is an idea that he jotted down twice in manuscripts: "Every soul has its own individual language."[25] Dante's instinctive bias in favor of the *demos* also arched over Walt's entire career; in a late essay he reiterated this credo: "really great poetry is always (like Homeric or Biblical canticles) the result of a national spirit."[26] In his poem "With Antecedents" (*LG 1892*, 191), Walt bluntly says that his verse was aimed at the ordinary person: "For the sake of him I typify, for the common average man's sake." Then he turns, Dante-like, to his *lettor* and adds, for "your sake if you are he." And all these common persons would join together to produce a *nation*. A year after his *Leaves* debut, Whitman made clear that this political agenda would require the energy of poetry: "I heard the voice arising demanding bards . . . by them alone can these States be fused into the compact organism of a Nation."[27] At the end of his career, Walt was still emphasizing the *risorgimento* note, declaring that "L. of G.'s Purport" (*LG* 1892, 420) was to "fuse, complete, extend" a national identity.

The essence of Dante's style, we have seen, is linguistic simplicity. Walt's garrulous 1855 preface also contains a Dantean paean to simplicity: "the sunshine of the light of letters is simplicity. Nothing is better than simplicity" (vi). He ends with spirited advocacy for "grand American expression" that is "brawny enough and limber and full enough." When Walt calls American English "the powerful language of resistance," one quickly thinks of the resistance to the rich and powerful so often displayed in the *Comedy*. America's vulgar tongue is also suited to teaching many of the *Comedy*'s lessons: "It is the chosen tongue to express growth faith self-esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude prudence decision and courage." All these are lessons the pilgrim learns in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. He then adds a remark unwittingly pertinent to *Paradiso*: "Grand American expression" is also "the medium that shall well nigh express

the inexpressible" (xii).

Whitman often makes clear his desire to appeal to the same kind of "common person" that Dante addressed. In an early poem, he pictures an ideal nation, one where "the populace rise at once against the never-ending audacity of elected persons" ("Song of the Broad-Axe" *LG 1892*, 152). He was scornful of the denizens of the upper class: the privileged, the rich, the parlor-incarcerated, the learned "punkin-heads." His *Democratic Vistas* assails them all as "a mob of fashionably-dressed speculators and vulgarians" (12). Walt was appalled by the "huge flow of our age's materialism" and all the citizens eager to "feverishly make money" or "flippantly kill time" (55, 58). This, of course, captures the ethos among the miserables trudging everywhere in *Inferno* and Dante's phrase for Florence as *nostra terra prava* ("our depraved land"—In6:9). To save America from itself and restore its soul, Walt sounds like a new Dante: "I demand races of orbic bards" who are capable of "portraying interior or spiritual life" (52). The key that Walt finally reveals as "the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these States" is also Dantesque: "Intense and loving comradeship" (61)—we will return to the subject of love later. The philosophical heart of *Democratic Vistas* rests in Whitman's simple assertion that "moral identity" is "the quality to-day most needed" in America (9). Later in the same work, he reiterates this view more eloquently: "moral conscientiousness, crystalline, without flaw, not Godlike only, entirely human, awes and enchants forever" (62).[28] This conviction radiates throughout *Leaves of Grass*, and it also epitomizes the pilgrim's ecstatic utterances at the end of *Paradiso*.

It is granted on all fronts that Dante's Florentine "idiom" created the foundations for the modern Italian language; Walt noted this too. Nor would many deny that Dante also aided the political and geographical unification of Italy, though this was not achieved until centuries later. The *Comedy*'s famous and understandable hatred of factional politics finally helped to usher in the *risorgimento*.[29] Walt followed Dante, of course, more explicitly and self-consciously as a bard of national self-identity and union. He, in fact, assumed the mantle very explicitly at his debut performance: "The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people" (*LG 1855*, iv). In an early poem Whitman uses the word again in a highly politicized context: "I heard the voice arising demanding bards . . . by them alone can these States be fused into the compact organism of a Nation" ("By Blue Ontario's Shore," *LG 1892*, 268-269). In his spread-eagle post-Civil War poem "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" he boasted, "I'd sow a seed for thee of endless Nationality" (*LG 1892*, 347).

The nationality embedded in the *Comedy* is most easily grasped in Dante's choice of Virgil—the Roman poet he knew best, quoted most, and idolized—to be his fictional companion. The *Aeneid* is both a national epic and about a focal protagonist on a long journey, and the *Comedy* itself was destined to mimic this same two-sided contour. Though perhaps not wittingly, Whitman's *Leaves* performs the same dual functions: describing the life's journey of a single individual—"I celebrate myself"—and exalting the "highest separate personality, these States" and their "common aggregate, the Union."[30] Whitman also underlines the personal-national duality in his life's work by urging that a "fused and fervent identity of the individual" be united "with the fact of American totality." "We need," he adds, "this conviction of nationality as a faith absorb'd in the blood and belief of the people."[31] Whitman's ideal of a kind of civilian paradise seems to figure poignantly in *Paradiso*, when the pilgrim waxes nostalgic about the Florence of his ancestor Cacciaguida's day: "with them I saw / her people so acclaimed and just, that on / her staff the lily never was reversed, / nor was it made bloodred by factious hatred" (Pa16:151-54).[32]

One cannot leave the subject of poetic style without mentioning the most important point of all: Dante and Walt were utterly *sui generis*. The poet Eugenio Montale flatly declared that Dante's "voice is entirely his own from the outset" and that "Dante cannot be repeated." The same, of course, can justly be said of Walt. There may have been brief flickers of *terza rima* before Dante, but his huge display of this rhyme-rich stanza form has never been rivaled; attempts to mimic it have been sporadic at best. Likewise, there may have been a few scattered feints at unrhymed, long-lined blank verse before Whitman's in *Leaves*, but no poet has exploited the possibilities of this style so virtuosically. Countless attempts to mimic, mock, or parody his style have all fallen flat. When he summons his muse to help him do battle—"Come said the Muse, / Sing me a song no poet yet has chanted, / Sing me the universal" (*LG 1892*, 181)—it may seem a hopelessly old-fashioned cliché, but it is a summons that both Dante and Walt could be said to have fulfilled.

## *Pedagogy: The Literature of Teachable Moments*

The chief purport of the *Comedy* and *Leaves* is to offer a *curriculum vitae*: in-person teaching is at the core of both works. In one of his *Calamus* poems Walt makes clear the teacher is in: "Many things to absorb I teach to help you become eleve of mine" ("To a Western Boy" *LG 1892*, 110); this is a sentiment

that could be inscribed over the *Comedy*'s portal. There, the pilgrim Dante is offered the tutoring services of several figures: for all of *Inferno* and most of *Purgatorio* the teacher is the perfectly chosen Virgil, a poet adored by Dante, who happened to have experience describing Aeneas's visit to the underworld. Beatrice later takes charge of the classroom, and then, in *Paradiso*, St. Thomas Aquinas becomes another substitute teacher. The last one is St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Allen Ginsberg memorably called Whitman an "old courage-teacher" ("A Supermarket in California"), and that is an apt way to think about the educational mission of Dante's tutelary spirits guiding an ascent to spiritual perfection. Dante the poet/pilgrim says this is his goal in his opening invocation: "help me fulfill the perfection of your nature" (In2:8 Pinsky). Walt expressed a similar soul-yearning: "Open mouth of my soul uttering gladness, / Eyes of my soul seeing perfection" ("Song at Sunset" *LG 1892*, 374).

The ideal magic of effective teaching is to combine challenging, but not too intimidating, rigor with benevolent confidence-building. We will see this often with Virgil and, later, Beatrice. Whitman's pedagogical coin has the same two sides, sometimes evidenced in the same poem. "You have slumber'd upon yourself all your life" with eyelids "closed most of the time," he can chide, shortly after gushing, "I love none better than you" ("To You" *LG 1892*, 186-188). But he is most memorable as a courage-teacher, a delighter in "Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition" ("I Sing the Body Electric" *LG 1892*, 81). Walt is in love with it: "Muscle and pluck forever!" ("Song of the Broad-Axe" *LG 1892*, 151).

Virgil is fortunate that his pilgrim charge is receptive, trusting, and mostly docile and respectful. The pilgrim often addresses him as *maestro*, which reminds us of how Whitman famously addressed Emerson in an 1856 letter as "Dear Friend and Master" (*LG 1856*, 346). Indeed, the beginning of *Inferno* sets the curriculum in Whitmanic motion on the open road with these words to Virgil:

> "You, with your words, have so disposed my heart
> to longing for this journey . . .
> Now go; a single will fills both of us:
> you are my guide, my governor, my master."
> These were my words to him; when he advanced,
> I entered on the steep and savage path. (In2:136-42)

This is precisely the attitude Walt hoped for from the reader of "Song of Myself."

Early in the first canto, the pilgrim addresses Virgil with most lavish praise: "Are you then that Virgil, you the fountain / that freely pours so rich

a stream of speech? . . . the only one from whom my writing drew / the noble style for which I have been honored" (In1:79-87). The passage reveals the same *amour propre* Whitman expressed in his "greatest poet" boasting. And Virgil begins early to buck up his charge—"one must leave behind every hesitation; / here every cowardice must meet its death"—and challengingly warns, "see the miserable people, / those who have lost the good of the intellect" (In3:14-19). An extraordinary bonding develops, even improbably involving the sense of touch, since the pilgrim's body is real and Virgil's not:

> And when, with gladness in his face, he placed
> his hand upon my own, to comfort me,
> he drew me in among the hidden things. (In3:19-21)

This touching is a highly characteristic gesture for Whitman, the supreme poet of physical touch—a favorite example: "I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy, / To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand" (*LG 1892*, 52). Another Whitman moment comes near the end of *Inferno* as the pair confronts the fearsome "lofty towers" of the Ninth Circle: "Then lovingly he took me by the hand" (In31:28). Almost worthy of "Song of Myself" are the lines given to Virgil near the climax of *Inferno*, when the pilgrim and Virgil are placed on the frozen lake Cocytus and encounter a giant:

> And Virgil, when he felt himself caught up,
> called out to me: "Come here, so I can hold you,"
> then made one bundle of himself and me. (In31:133-35)

Two beings together clinging, as Walt would say. Virgil asks the pilgrim the same question that Whitman asks toward the end of "Song of Myself": "Who wishes to walk with me?" (*LG 1892*, 78). That walk will be an education.

Other passages in the *Comedy* prove to be Education 101 reminders, such as when Beatrice urges, rather schoolmarmishly, "Open your mind to what I shall disclose, / and hold it fast within you; he who hears, / but does not hold what he has heard, learns nothing" (Pa5:40-42). Sometimes it is useful to single out the student from all other classmates, which is what Dante does to the reader in the last scarifying canto of *Inferno*: "O reader, do not ask of me how I / grew faint and frozen then—I cannot write it: / all words would fall far short of what it was" (In34:22-24). Another part of the teacher's praxis revealed in the *Comedy* and *Leaves* is the usefulness of unpredictability, serendipity, and contradictoriness. Dante's Virgil is on the whole of a Quakerly disposition—benign, surprisingly plain-spoken, soothing, and occasionally a bit wry—but it is the pilgrim himself

who keeps the reader on edge. In fact, he boasts about being mercurial, aptly enough, when he enters the Sphere of Mercury: "I—who by my very nature am / given to every sort of change" (Pa5:98-99). A. N. Wilson notes that "one of the things that make [the *Comedy*] such electrifying reading is its unpredictability—the sudden blazes of anger, its passionate intensity, its impenetrable hatreds."[33] Wilson also makes much of other qualities to which students of Whitman are well-accustomed. "We must accept that Dante was a man of contradictions," he finds, and we must live with Dante's "paradoxical and self-contradictory standards, a panache amounting to insolence"—Walt might have preferred "insouciance": "I think the greatest aide is in I my *insouciance*—my utter indifference" (*WWWC* 3:553). Wilson says elsewhere, "Whatever qualities we seek in Dante, consistency of outlook is not one of them." Wilson also singles out another famous Whitman habit in Dante—constant revision: "In Dante, experience is constantly revisited and reinterpreted."[34] Our edgy relationship with Dante and/or his persona is familiar to readers of Whitman, who, like his "Friend and Master," was contemptuous of rational consistency—Emerson memorably asked, "Suppose you should contradict yourself, what then?"[37]

Unexpectedly raunchy humor is sometimes a handy, if risky, pedagogical lubricant; a good fart joke, for example (see In21:159 and 28:24). This is a good way to keep students guessing: being mercurial and unpredictable. Keep them a-twitter, on edge. Of course, some of the teacher's tricks are of a more devious kind. One is to try—and perhaps sometimes succeed—in reading the student's mind. Virgil does this when he speaks to the pilgrim of "the longings you have hid from me" (In10:18).

A moment always eagerly awaited by a teacher is when the penny drops and the student finally *gets* it. The pilgrim experiencing the divine spark of new knowledge suddenly blossoming into existence is splendidly expressed in *Paradiso*:

> This is the origin, this is the spark
> that then extends into a vivid flame
> and, like a star in heaven, glows in me. (Pa24:145-47)

When pennies drop more often, the teacher should begin to think his job is over. The time will come when he must say, as Walt does in "Song of Myself": "Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself" (*LG 1892*, 73). The educational process ends when the student has learned how to learn. Graduation, then—and commencing forth *alone*. This may be why the final words Virgil utters to the pilgrim sound very much like

those of a typical commencement speaker:

> Await no further word or sign from me:
> your will is free, erect, and whole—to act
> against that will would be to err: therefore
> I crown and miter you over yourself. (Pu27:139-42)

Virgil, in other words, has reached the same point Whitman does near the end of "Song of Myself":

> I am the teacher of athletes,
> He that by me spreads a wider breast than my own
> proves the width of my own,
> He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the
> teacher. (*LG 1892*, 74)

The pilgrim Dante enjoys several tutelary spirits, but in *Leaves,* the reader is largely instructed by the poet himself. Dante addresses his *lettor* perhaps a dozen times, which is about as often as Whitman addresses his reader with the phrase "whoever you are." In "Our Old Feuillage," the poet could almost be speaking like Dante's Virgil when he exclaims, "Whoever you are! how can I but offer you divine leaves, that you also be eligible as I am?" (*LG 1892*, 142). In many ways, Walt treats his reader in Dantesque fashion. He is a fount of good life-coaching advice almost verbatim to Virgil's: "commence to-day to inure yourself to pluck, realism, self-esteem, definiteness, elevatedness" ("To a Pupil" *LG 1892*, 302). He also has the knack of a head-of-school master: "To young men my problems offering—no dallier I—I the muscle of their brains trying" (*"So Long!" LG 1892*, 381). At other times the poet can turn almost menacing, like a stalker who knows far too much about his student/reader: "I fear you are walking the walks of dreams . . . I pursue you where none else has pursued you" ("To You," *LG 1892*, 187). But, like Beatrice, he can soften and turn on his courage-teaching smile, just as the pilgrim describes it: "her smile to me was signal / that made the wings of my desire grow" (Pa15:71-72). Walt also encourages the risk-taking seeker: "Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore, / Now I will you to be a bold swimmer" (*LG 1892*, 74). In his valedictory poem, Walt confides rather daringly: "remember my words, I may again return, / I love you, I depart from materials, / I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead" ("*So long!*" *LG 1892*, 382). This vanishment is right up there with that of Virgil's shade in *Purgatorio*.

Teaching is a profession that looks to the future. Education is the *cammin*

to enlightenment, the deployment of intellect to see the light—for Dante the light of intellect and Heaven are synonymous (Pa30:40). The *Encyclopædia Britannica* declared that the *Comedy*'s aim "was not to delight, but to reprove, to rebuke, to exhort; to form men's characters by teaching them what courses of life will meet with reward, what with penalty" (11th ed., 1910). Especially after the pilgrim plants his feet firmly on the *diritta via*, the importance of intellect is emphasized. Beatrice warns him that there are *two* keys to divine wisdom. It is "buried from / the eyes of everyone whose intellect [*ingegno*] / has not matured within the flame of love" (Pa7:58-60). Several cantos later, the shade of St. Thomas warns of the danger of bringing a weary mind to life's journey; it will prove a leaden weight to one who must decide "*yes* or *no* when you do not see clearly":

> . . . he who decides without distinguishing
> must be among the most obtuse of men;
> opinion—hasty—often can incline
> to the wrong side, and then affection for
> one's own opinion binds, confines the mind. (Pa13:116-20)

Intellect is supremely helpful in thinking about and planning for the future. That is why Ben Franklin praised chess as a splendid mind-stimulating game—and why Prospero, another born pedagogue, arranges an auspicious scene of chess-play for Ferdinand and Miranda at the end of *The Tempest*. Mired in a futureless exile, Dante cast his eyes, Walt-like, upon his future as the greatest poet. His pilgrim's eyes are also certainly riveted on the future. The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam emphasized his futurism: "It is unthinkable to read the cantos of Dante without aiming them in the direction of the present day. They were made for that." He adds that this poet's eye was "naturally adjusted for one thing only: the revelation of the structure of the future."[38] Dante turned his back on the old style of the Provençal poets and embraced the "new" as Walt later did: writing in the vulgar Italian idiom, virtually inventing *terza rima*, and insinuating his own self into the drama of spiritual discovery.

Walt's futurism has a pedagogical flavor too. The spectacular lighting effects of the final *Paradiso* cantos come to mind as Whitman addresses the reader near the end of his iconic poem: "Now I wash the gum from your eyes, / You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life" (*LG 1892*, 74). While both our poets saw themselves as part of a long literary tradition—Dante mentions early in *Inferno* his poetic heroes Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan (In4:88-90)—their eyes were focused on the future,

on beginnings.

Dante and Walt were themselves beginners. Walt's poem "Beginners" describes them both, as we shall see later, and were also influential on *poets to come*. Walt's poem with that title expressed a sense that the ideal student will surpass—if not, as he elsewhere phrased it, "destroy"—his teacher:

> But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater
> than before known,
> Arouse! for you must justify me,
> I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future . . .
> ("Poets to Come" *LG 1892*, 18)

Walt ends the poem just as Bernard of Clairvaux leaves the pilgrim at the end of *Paradiso*: "Leaving it to you to prove and define it,/ Expecting the main things from you." No wonder, at the end of his life, he simply declared, "my volume is a candidate for the future" (*LG 1892*, 437).

Teachers are preparers of soil, the planters of seed. This metaphor appealed to Whitman. He even reminds us of Dante's style and imagery as he describes his teaching methods:

> Curious envelop'd messages delivering,
> Sparkles hot, seed ethereal down in the earth dropping . . .
> To ages and ages yet the growth of the seed leaving.
> ("*So Long!*" *LG 1892*, 381)

In "Song of the Universal," he declares of the earth, "Enclosed and safe within its central heart, / Nestles the seed of perfection" (*LG 1892*, 181). The *Comedy* is entirely centered on nurturing that seed. This is doubtless why the poet Montale says, "the entire poem is didactic, in a certain sense, because his instruction . . . was considered an integral part of the poetic work."[39] Boccaccio ends his Dantean work by explicating at length a dream Dante's mother had while pregnant with him (see *Life*, 55-59). At one point, the boy turns into a shepherd, which Boccaccio interprets to mean he would become a great teacher: "those of great knowledge, who either by great reading what men in the past have written, or by writing what seems not to have been very clearly expounded or totally neglected, instruct the minds and souls of their readers . . . . Our poet immediately or very soon became that kind of shepherd" (57-58). Such a shepherd Walt also became; hence his fervent bonding with Christ, which we will see later.

Dreams and visions are an important feature of Dante's pilgrim finding his *diritta via*. Well into *Purgatorio*, just after encountering the Slothful, he falls elaborately to sleep: "I was so drawn from random thought / to thought that, wandering in mind, I shut / my eyes, transforming thought on thought to dream" (Pu18:143-45). Dreams and visions continue to aid him on his way in *Paradiso*. Dreams assisted Walt and his reader as well. As he boasts, repetitiously, in his fine nocturnal fantasy "The Sleepers," "I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers, / And I become the other dreamers" (*LG 1892*, 326). This, of course, is but to say all life is a dream. Whitman may not have known there was a 1635 Spanish play by Calderon titled *La vida es sueño*—but he did declare "all the world a dream" ("Song of the Universal" *LG 1892*, 183). Literature itself is a dream.

Dreams in Whitman are sometimes horrible: "Long enough have you dream'd contemptible dreams," he warns his reader (*LG 1892*, 74); elsewhere he menaces, "Whoever you are, I fear you are walking the walks of dreams" (*LG 1892*, 186). But other dreams are splendid. One, from *Calamus*, is of a city that the Florentine poet would have been happy to contemplate, a "new city of Friends": "Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love" ("I Dream'd in a Dream" *LG 1892*, 109). Whitman also hails, in Dantean spirit, all "aspirations toward the far ideal, enthusiast's dreams of brotherhood" ("O Star of France" *LG 1892*, 306).

Contending with a real humankind so phantasmagorically flawed, Dante and Walt envisioned a new humanity to replace it.[40] An important poem establishing Walt's own visionary credentials is "Eidólons," an 1876 poem that he eventually placed in the *Inscriptions* cluster of portal poems for *Leaves*. The title is from the Greek and translates as either "phantom" or "idol." The poem expresses a Dantean devotion to *process*. Indeed, at its beginning is embedded the equivalent of a synopsis of the *Comedy* that embraces all three canticles:

> Ever the dim beginning,
> Ever the growth, the rounding of the circle,
> The summit and the merge at the last (to surely start again),
> Eidólons! Eidólons! (*LG 1892*, 12)

Eidólons are later defined as the "true realities" or as the "body lurking there within thy body."[41] D. Neil Richardson says of the poem: Whitman, "like a

true mystic, seeks to demonstrate the incompleteness of our understanding of reality."[42] Near the end of "Eidólons" its addressee is revealed—"And thee my soul"—and here, yet another Dantean journey of the soul becomes the poem's premise.

Having pioneered into visionary realms, both poets confronted the Ineffability Problem: how to convey the mind-blowing in mere words—a problem also notably faced by John Milton and William Blake. Among countless passages showing struggle to capture the ineffable is the pilgrim's response to the vision of the white rose and the mother of Christ near the end of *Paradiso*:

> And even if my speech were rich as my
> imagination is, I should not try
> to tell the very least of her delights. (Pa31:136-38)

When Whitman comes to describe his supreme voyager-*eidólon*, Columbus, he envelops him in the same idealized verbal haze that radiates from Dante's Beatrice:

> And who art thou sad shade?
> Gigantic, visionary, thyself a visionary,
> With majestic limbs and pious beaming eyes,
> Spreading around with every look of thine a golden world,
> Enhuing it with gorgeous hues. ("Passage to India" *LG 1892*, 320)

Many are the times in his *Comedy*—but especially in *Paradiso*—that Dante must paraphrase this oath of Walt's: "I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell" ("Song of the Open Road" *LG 1892*, 125).

Just before we leave *Inferno* the poet finally admits that Hell is "that place so hard to speak about" (In32:14 Pinsky), though nothing will match the challenges he faced in Cantos 30 to 33 of *Paradiso*. Perhaps the supreme—and most succinct—expression of the challenge of a visionary subject comes as the pilgrim sets off with Beatrice for Paradise: "Passing beyond the human cannot be worded."[43] Transcending the human takes courage plus—Dante tells us—intellect and free will. Virgil joins this dynamic duo in mid-*Purgatorio*, as the *Comedy* becomes ever more meditative and philosophical:

> Even if we allow necessity
> as source for every love that flames in you,
> the power to curb that love is still your own.
> This noble power is what Beatrice
> means by free will . . . (Pu18:70-74)

Freedom of volition and having one's wits about one also require that new wisdom replace old wisdom. There is a short 1865 Whitman poem that makes this point—it also suggests that the best pushers of envelopes will be solitary wanderers. "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" begins with a professor droning on at a final class. Applause in the lecture-hall is heard, but the speaker—Walt, of course—then confesses,

> How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
> Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
> In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
> Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars. (*LG 1892*, 214)

One thinks immediately of Dante in the *Comedy* chiding scholastic rhetoric and philosophy and the lucrative professions. Perhaps even the hint of the uncanny ("mystical"), the outlier's instinct ("wander'd off"), the desire for solitude, and all those stars—more about stars in the following section—are all Dante touches. *Paradiso*-like enlightenment in dreamtime is also present at the end of the last poem of the final *Leaves* edition: "An unknown sphere more real than I dream'd, more direct, darts awakening rays about me, *So long!*" (*LG 1892*, 382). *Awakening*: the experience both the *Comedy* and *Leaves* aim for.

A sphere *more real than dreamed*. Whitman had occasion at mid-career, age 56, to expand on the interpenetration of the real-bodied and the spiritual in all his poems. In his preface for the 1876 Centennial edition of *Leaves*, he said the volume's "songs of the body and existence" were subsumed by the conviction that "the unseen soul govern[s] absolutely at last." Then he called it an inevitable "problem and paradox" of his work that it presents an "ardent and fully appointed personality entering the sphere of the resistless gravitation of spiritual law" (*Complete Prose Works*, hereafter *CPW*, available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*, 281).[44] The double helix of the real and the numinous rules the *Comedy* and *Leaves*. Walt neatly summed up the interpenetration of these two worlds in his autobiographical valedictory essay "A Backward Glance": "While I can not understand it or argue it out, I fully believe . . . that invisible spiritual results, just as real and definite as the visible eventuate all concrete life and all materialism, through Time" (*LG 1892*, 437).[45] Education has been defined as what is left over after you forget everything you have learned. The same could be said of our two masterpieces, in which real life and visionary life do battle. The "invisible spiritual results" are what is left over in readers as they put each book down.

Dante and Walt were at once autobiographers and cosmologists. "Great is life . . . and real and mystical . . . . Sure as the stars return again after they merge in the light, death is great as life,"[46] Walt opined in his first *Leaves*, and Dante's masterpiece suggests he would have agreed. In their masterworks, the real world and a mystical one coexist, and they do so always under those stars. The *Comedy* and *Leaves of Grass* are brilliant simultaneous explorations of the microcosmos of man and the macrocosmos of the universe—the individual soul as enveloped in the universal soul. John Donne defined the smaller of the two in one of his Holy Sonnets: "I am a little world made cunningly / Of elements, and an angelic sprite." Both our poets explored the "sprite" of the individual/reader, but they also placed its material "elements" within increasingly capacious contexts: its relations with lovers, family, fellow citizens of a city (Florence, Mannahatta), nation (Italy, These States), and the globe. Dilating further, the poets take the reader finally on a voyage into the empyrean, into space. Dante acknowledges this vast scope when he says his *poema sacro* is a "work so shared by heaven and by earth" (Pa25:1-2). Whitman expressed his own astounding double focus with a familiar image: "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars" (*LG 1892*, 53).[47]

Dante could well have said, as Walt boasts of his reader: "With time and space I him dilate and fuse the immortal laws, / To make himself by them the law unto himself" (*LG 1892*, 14). In short, Dante and Walt became cosmologists of Personality. "Dilate" and "fuse" are operative words in Whitman's world: he is consumed by the urge to expand the scope of individual Personality and then place it in the context of an "orbic" whole or universe.[48] And stars, it turns out, are vitally important in the cosmology of their verse. It is a nice touch that Boccaccio noted Dante's death thus: "On the Ides of September, in the 1321st year of our Lord, he went back to his native stars" (*Life*, 25). That the plural stars (*stelle*) is the last word of *each* of the three canticles of the *Comedy* is no happenstance. Stars also peep through the firmament often in *Leaves*. They appear many times in "Song of Myself"—notably where Walt declares "The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good" *LG 1892*, 34). They also preside over the Lincoln threnody: "The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars, / Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land" (*LG 1892*, 259). Of course, he saluted them in his poem to the star-spangled banner: "Flag of stars! thick-sprinkled bunting!" (*LG 1892*, 368).[49]

What is more, both poets wanted to bring *good news* about the greater

cosmos.[50] Perhaps the drollest moment in all the *Comedy* is when Dante says toward the end of *Inferno*, "It is not jokingly that one begins / To describe the bottom of the universe" (In32:7-8 Pinsky), but in *Paradiso* he cast his eye on all of creation and Beatrice pronounces it good:

> All things, among themselves,
> possess an order; and this order is
> the form that makes the universe like God. (Pa1:103-5)

After hearing a kind of hallelujah chorus in the Eighth Heaven, the pilgrim says: "What I saw seemed to me to be a smile / the universe had smiled" (Pa27:4-5).

Dante was certainly not above employing the pseudo-science of astrology when it was useful in the *Comedy*—I was charmed to learn that Dante was a Gemini, like myself. But he was also seriously attentive to the science of astronomy, as were many Florentines. Mary McCarthy has observed that Florentines "have a twin predilection for astronomy and the science of optics," the city being then a world center for optical and astronomical instruments. Its science museum today has a large collection of armillary spheres which show the physical relationship of celestial bodies; these obviously inspired the arrangement of rings and spheres in *Paradiso*.[51]

The universe seemed also to smile on Walt, and he naturally returned the favor. "All is a procession, / The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion" (*LG 1892*, 85)—which sounds much like the Dante of *Paradiso*. That canticle ends with the same cosmic gift offered by Walt in his "To Rich Givers": "I bestow upon any man or woman the entrance to all the gifts of the universe" (*LG 1892*, 216). When the reader is urged to take lovers "on the road with you," he makes clear where that Dantean open road is: "know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls" (*LG 1892*, 127). When the universe comes to mind, Walt's instinct is invariably to accentuate the positive. "All the things of the universe are perfect miracles" he promises in "Starting from Paumanok," and in the same poem he presents himself "To be wrestled with as I pass for the solid prizes of the universe" (*LG 1892*, 25, 27). Much later in life—in "Roaming in Thought (After Reading Hegel)"—he once again declared his optimism: "Roaming in thought over the Universe, I saw the little that is Good steadily hastening towards immortality" and the Evil, conversely, becoming "lost and dead" (*LG 1892*, 216). Of course, he could have declared the same rosy view "after reading Dante."[52]

Walt's take on the cosmos as benevolent may not be due solely to his well-honed pose of cheerful optimism. It may also be due to his acquaintance

with the first published modern scientific cosmology, written by the Prussian naturalist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1769-1859). His masterwork, *Kosmos*, was first published in 1845 and the last, full five-volume edition appeared in 1862. Harper Brothers published *Cosmos* in 1858-59—it is available today in a Harper imprint—and Whitman appears to have read and been influenced by it.[53]

Whitman mentions Humboldt in his notes as early as 1849 and actually quotes from him in an essay on language and words that he seems to have authored. The passage he quotes is highly pertinent to the *process* of spiritual ambulation that is at the heart of the *Comedy* and *Leaves*: "One must not consider Language as a product dead and formed but once: it is an animate being and ever creative. Human thought elaborates itself with the progress of intelligence; and of this thought language is a manifestation. An idiom cannot therefore remain stationary: it walks, it develops, it grows up."[54] We are again in a Dantesque and Whitmanic world of *process*: change, transformation, evolution. "All is a procession" as Walt puts it (*LG 1892*, 85). Every person is moving and evolving at the same time. Whitman reminds us of this in a late short poem, "Going Somewhere," honoring his "noblest woman-friend" Anne Gilchrist. Most of its words are in quotes as coming from her: "we all are onward, onward, speeding slowly, surely bettering, / Life, life an endless march" (*LG 1892*, 397). But these are Walt's words too and—as a fellow evolutionary optimist with Humboldt—he believed them. That disconcerting oxymoron "speeding slowly" well captures the tension of reading such vast but earnest works as the *Comedy* and *Leaves*.

Walt famously identified himself for the first time—no name graces the title page—on page 29 of the original embossed green leather 1855 *Leaves* volume: "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos." A reader of his flamboyant 1855 preface, however, would have encountered the word "kosmos" already. There Walt warms to the task of self-puffery, asserting that "the attributes of the poets of the kosmos concentre in the real body and soul" (ix). The syntax leads to puzzlement—as often in this preface—but the word reappears more comprehensibly in the 1860 poem "Starting from Paumanok," one of Walt's many credo-poems. He introduces the microcosmos—Paumanok was the Algonquian name for Long Island—"Paumanok where I was born, / Well-begotten, and rais'd by a perfect mother" (*LG 1892*, 18). But in the poem's second section, he dilates its scope to Dantean proportions:

> Victory, union, faith, identity, time,
> The indissoluble compacts, riches, mystery,
> Eternal progress, the kosmos, and the modern reports. (*LG 1892*, 19)

Of this vintage Whitman list, he sums up, "This then is life." One can say these lines also sum up the pilgrim's path in the *Comedy*. The passage ends on an especially Dantean note: "How curious! how real! / Underfoot the divine soil, overhead the sun." Of course, there is no sun in *Inferno,* which has no sky, though it does shine once at the end to prepare us for the departure to Mount Purgatory (In34:96). But the real sun shines often in *Purgatorio*, just as a figurative one is often resplendent in *Paradiso*.

One of Walt's most Dantesque performances, which first appeared in that most estimable *Leaves* edition of 1860, is titled "Kosmos." It has not figured much in Whitman criticism.[55] "Kosmos" undertakes to define the individual cosmos but in a way that fills out the universe. Its first lines are worthy of Humboldt's pioneering cosmography: "Who includes diversity and is Nature, / Who is the amplitude of the earth" (*LG 1892*, 303). The poem shares several of the premises of the *Comedy*. Praise for "the great charity of the earth" reflects the moral dimension of Dante's universe of love. When Walt calls the Kosmos "the most majestic lover," he is aligning himself with Dante, as we will see below in a discussion of love. Whitman defines the Kosmos as duly holding "his or her triune proportion of realism, spiritualism, and of the aesthetic or intellectual"; this rehearses Dante's notion that attaining perfect love requires a thirst for spiritual knowledge combined with full application of the intellect and one's own aesthetic personality. One of the *Comedy*'s spinal convictions is that the body and soul must traverse the cosmos *together*; hence, the Kosmos here has "consider'd the body finds all its organs and parts good." As so often with Walt, once the individual Kosmos inhabits its own body, the person will dilate to "understand by subtle analogies all other theories, / The theory of a city, a poem, and of the large politics of these States."

From there the scope of Walt's Kosmos expands enormously: he will believe "not only in our globe with its sun and moon, but in other globes with their suns and moons"—a view worthy of NASA's Webb space telescope. The poem climaxes with perhaps the ultimate iteration of Dante's image of humanity—Virgil and the pilgrim "bundling" together: the Kosmo will construct the "house of himself or herself, not for a day but for all time . . . / The past, the future, dwelling there, like space, inseparable together."[56] The poem restates the image of the last tercet in the *Comedy*, which emphasizes the primacy of love, though it is rather a shame that Walt did not include Dante's *stelle* somewhere in the space-scape of his "Kosmos."[57]

## *The Body, Sex, Sexuality*

Dante and Walt were profoundly aligned in their views of the body, sex, sexuality, even, as we shall see, of homosexuality. But in order to explore this shared worldview, it is necessary to go back to twelfth/thirteenth-century Languedoc in southern France, also known as the Occitane. A body of religious belief arose there which viewed the cosmos as ruled by the eternal conflict between two deities, one good and one evil; this sect, called the Cathars, also believed that all matter, including the human body, was intrinsically evil. All sex was suspect. This conflict-based, ascetic belief, drawn from the early church, was eventually pronounced a Catholic heresy and later referred to as the Cathar heresy. By the time Dante was born, this heresy had been largely eradicated, though Cathar influence managed to survive in the growing Catholic emphasis on priestly celibacy. Dante, who would learn late in life to despise the politics of faction, rejected the Catharist theology of faction; instead, he became in his youth a partisan for love and courtship.

That is, Dante joined the party of the Provençal troubadour poets, a movement that also arose in Languedoc and was couched in the local Occitan dialect. The troubadours must have flourished in resistance to Cathar prudery. Over time this movement produced in Italy the *dolce stil novo* ("sweet new style"). The "father" of *dolce stil novo* is identified as Guido Guinizzelli (1225-1276), and he makes a famous appearance in *Purgatorio*—where else!—on the Terrace of Lust (Pu26:91ff). Dante also became a close friend of perhaps the most distinguished of the *stilnovisti*, his fellow Florentine Guido Cavalcanti (c.1255-1300); he too is mentioned in the *Comedy*. Dante joined the *stilnovisti* in 1294 when, nearing thirty, he produced his "little book" *Vita Nuova*, a prose narrative interspersed with poetry honoring his real-life infatuation with Beatrice Portinari.[58] Dante there explains how love's power expands:

> Love lets me feel the sweetness of his presence,
> and if it at that point I could still feel bold,
> my words could make all mankind fall in love.[59]

As he composed these words Dante could scarcely have imagined they would dilate into the *Comedy*, an epic poem intended, in fact, to make all mankind fall in love with love. Whitman makes the same point about the real-life love affair he experienced in the late 1850s, which produced the *Calamus* cluster of love poems. For these poems, Whitman invented his own *dolce stil novo*: "I loved a

certain person ardently and my love was not return'd, / Yet out of that I have written these songs" ("Sometimes with One I Love" *LG 1892*, 110).

The point, of course, is that two masterworks of astonishing spiritual and philosophical scope began in the mundane, real world, with individual humans encountering each other. Ignoring Catharism, Dante clearly embraced the body as the necessary tenor for the vehicle of love (see Pa13:52-54). The body should not be viewed with suspicion but enjoyed and celebrated. Boccaccio did not shy from this controversial subject when he wrote of Dante's sex life: "lust also found very ample space in his life—not only in his younger years but also during his adult years as well."[60] Dante, in other words, had to move on from youthfully fixating on romantic love in the *Vita Nuova*, just as Shakespeare had to move on from the early, elaborate showing-off of his *Sonnets* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Dante did so, distancing himself from the crazy infatuation with Beatrice Portinari, now dead, perhaps by indulging in an affair with a mysterious woman from the nearby Alpine Casentino valley—a real-bodied woman, much like the Dark Lady or that other dark lady Cleopatra. A. N. Wilson thinks that Dante seems to have experienced a *mezzo del cammin*-life crisis around this time. This shadowy Alpine affair, he thinks, "taught Dante to forget his Neoplatonic fantasies of some rarified love leading him up to Heaven . . . only real love(s) could point the way forwards, and this included loves of the body" (*Dante in Love*, 251). Wilson argues this was a vital turning point and must have set him on the course to writing something that would "guarantee his immortality." "The metaphor which comes to mind," Wilson writes, "is that Dante needed to turn himself inside out" (*Dante in Love*, 247). As it happens, Whitman uses the same metaphor to urge the wisdom of turning a new leaf: "It does a man good to turn himself inside out once in a while: to sort of turn the tables on himself: to look at himself through other eyes—especially skeptical ones."[61]

Flesh—eroticized flesh—is necessary, then, for the narrative of the *Comedy* itself. In the Sphere of Venus in *Paradiso* Canto 9, the place of erotic life is confirmed. Symonds seconded this notion in his introduction to Dante: to romantic lovers Dante "is singularly lenient," and he observes "the sweet planet of Venus is full of lovers" (*Introduction*, 155). One of the denizens there is the real-life Cunizza da Romano, who eloped with a troubadour poet and was thrice married. Dante may have met her in her old age, and included her in his poem because she cured her addiction to sex and found God. Her presence "reveals that Heaven is not for puritans," says Wilson (*Dante in Love*, 304). Also in Venus's sphere, the Biblical prostitute Rahab appears as a bright star, presumably because she protected Joshua's spies at Jericho.[62] The reality of the pilgrim

having a physical body runs through *Inferno*; its inmates instantly perceive that he is carrying a real body's weight. Walt, too, let us know he was aware of the artistic usefulness of the flesh: "I see the place of the idea of the Deity incarnated by avatars in human forms" (*LG 1892*, 115).

Walt joined Dante in rejecting the Catharist heresy by advocating often for absolute parity of the body and soul, another double-helix. This begins in the 1855 preface, where he tells us "the greatest poet . . . favors body and soul the same"; he will "attract his own land body and soul to himself" (xi). In the poem Whitman eventually placed as a major lead-in to "Song of Myself," he is very emphatic on this point: "Behold, the body includes and is the meaning, the main concern, and includes and is the soul . . . how superb and how divine is your body, or any part of it!" (*LG 1892*, 25). He repeats the idea memorably in "Song of Myself": "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul" (*LG 1892*, 45).[63] At the end of his career, he said all his "enterprise and questionings" came back to the need to inhabit "an identical body and soul, a personality" (*LG 1892*, 433). Both are needed by the cosmic mariner: "Ship of the body, ship of the soul, voyaging, voyaging, voyaging" ("Aboard at a Ship's Helm" *LG 1892*, 205).[64]

Dante could never write about sex with anything like candor: more than five hundred years after he died, it was still a forbidden subject in print. Walt himself was a major force in challenging this taboo. Privately, however, in 1889 he could enthuse about the subject: "sex, sex: always immanent: here with us discredited—not suffered: rejected from our art: yet still sex, sex: the root of roots: the life below the life!" (*WWWC* 4:453). But for more than three decades, Walt had been including graphic sex in his art with shocking temerity. He declared he would be "the bard of personality" and show that male and female are equal, just as are "sexual organs and acts!" (*LG 1892*, 24). Easily the most daringly sex-laden of all Walt's poems—"Bunch Poem"—appeared in 1856 and later as "Spontaneous Me." There he speaks of the "phallic thumb of love," of the "sensitive, orbic underlap'd brothers," and of "bellies press'd and glued together with love." Of this poem itself he says:

> This poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry,
> and that all men carry,
> (Know once for all, avow'd on purpose, wherever are men
> like me, are our lusty lurking masculine poems),
> Love-thoughts, love-juice, love-odor, love-yielding . . . (*LG 1892*, 90)

The most daringly sexy of *Leaves* editions appeared in 1860, and here is

what the *New York Times* thought of it: "Mr. Whitman sees nothing vulgar in that which is commonly regarded as the grossest obscenity; rejects the laws of conventionality so completely as to become repulsive; gloats over coarse images with the gusto of a Rabelais."[65]

Dante rings in processions of angels and of souls ending their long journey in the festive pageant that ends *Paradiso*. Walt adds another kind of procession after he boasts that his own faith is "the greatest of faiths": that faith will feature "Dancing yet through the streets in a phallic procession" (*LG 1892*, 69). Dante's reading of the ancients may have afforded him knowledge of the phallic processions in honor of Dionysus, but the image was not available to him as a publishing author. Walt was subject to much less restraint, and he found many ways—ranging from subtle hints to brazen candor—to express sexual energy on the verge of release. No Whitman poem more eloquently captures this than "Earth, My Likeness," addressed to the earth:

> I now suspect there is something fierce in you eligible
> to burst forth,
> For an athlete is enamour'd of me, and I of him,
> But toward him there is something fierce and terrible
> in me eligible to burst forth,
> I dare not tell it in words, not even in these songs. (*LG 1892*, 109)

Another Ineffability Problem. This poem was one of the 45 *Calamus* poems that appeared in the 1860 *Leaves* and, in effect, commenced the long political struggle for gay liberation. Walt says he does not dare reveal his sexual truth, but in fact he *did* dare to do so with the *Calamus* poems—and many others in *Leaves*. The present essay begs the obvious question: what was Dante's own view about same-sex love/intercourse, which was in his day termed, rather vaguely, sodomy? To answer this question here requires a brief excursion among the *Dantisti*, who have debated the matter for centuries. *Dantisti* of recent vintage have added fascinating, surprisingly Whitmanic perspectives to the debate over Dante's understanding of same-sex desire.

First, it should be noted that same-sex relationships were far from rare in Dante's Florence. Mary McCarthy has summed up that "Homosexuality or bisexuality has always been very common in Florence." This "proclivity was found everywhere in the Renaissance, but in Florence it was deeply ingrown and far from 'unnatural.'"[66] The "sin," she observes, was notably found among artists: in Michelangelo and Leonardo, not to mention Donatello, Verrocchio, or Pontormo and the Mannerists. Same-sex desire may not have been written

about or present in books in his day, but Dante knew those that practiced such were treading everywhere on the stones of Florence.

The discussion of Dante's views about same-sex love has focused on the Seventh Circle of *Inferno* (Cantos 15 and 16) in which sins of violence—toward others (murderers), toward oneself (suicides), toward God (blasphemers), and toward Nature (sodomites)—are fittingly punished. Here the pilgrim meets a "company of spirits" trudging ceaselessly under a rain of fire: the Sodomites—though it should be noted that the Italian words *sodomia* and *sodomita* never appear in the *Comedy*. Most all the speakers in *Inferno* were Dante's near contemporaries, and the encounter that follows is one of the most poignant and emotional. For the pilgrim seems to recognize one in the group: "Are you here, Ser Brunetto?" "My son," the shade replies, "do not mind if Brunetto Latini lingers a while with you," and they separate for what turns into an amiable reunion chat (In15:30-31). This encounter is a highlight in the *Comedy*; Auerbach says it "remains engraved in the memory of every reader of the *Inferno*" (*Dante*, 136). But who *was* Brunetto Latini?

He was a Florentine notary, writer, and scholar (c.1220-1294). That Dante subjects him to infernal misery has long puzzled, since this interview reveals a loving, respectful, and mutually admiring student-teacher relationship. Latini was forty-five years Dante's senior and is praised by him as a mentor, though what and where he taught Dante is now unknown. Latini addresses him as "my son," uses the intimate *tu*, and—sounding like a hopeful teacher—accurately predicts the epic poem his student will write: "If you pursue your star, / you cannot fail to reach a splendid harbor" (In15:55-56). Dante then gives his Latini, who died well before Dante's exile, several excoriating lines about the populace of Florence: "The world has long since called them blind, a people / presumptuous, avaricious, envious; / be sure to cleanse yourself of their foul ways" (15:67-69). The real-life exile from Florence must have found writing these richly autobiographical lines delicious.[67] The pilgrim responds that his fond desire is that Brunetto could again "still endure this banishment / Away from human nature." Then follows this burst of gratitude:

> Your image—dear, fatherly, benevolent—
> Being fixed inside my memory, has imbued
> My heart: when in the fair world, hour by hour
> You taught me, patiently, it was you who showed
> The way man makes himself eternal . . . (In15:76-82 Pinsky)

The shade of Ser Brunetto then vanishes.

What to make of the cognitive dissonance of inflicting such pain on such a cherished father figure?[68] Commentators comfortable with Dante's acceptance of homosexuality as a sin against nature suggest that this was the general medieval view. That he was not scrupulous or sensitive about sodomy, they could point out, is the fact that St. Peter Damian—a Benedictine monk and cardinal who in the eleventh century virtually invented the sin of sodomy with his *Liber Gomorrianus*—actually appears among the contemplatives in the highest circle of *Paradiso* (Canto 21).

But among the *Dantisti* have appeared recent scholars who have delved into Dante's sodomy problem and come to more subtle, nuanced conclusions, and these views, it turns out, are more inclusive and Whitmanic in spirit. In the decades after the 1969 Stonewall uprising, Whitman scholars became increasingly bold in exploring sexual identity in his life and work, and the same trend has occurred in Dante studies, though perhaps several decades later. In 2006, for instance, Richard Kay would note that there is absolutely no evidence of Latini's homosexuality in the historical record, and that "his sins were intellectual in nature and primarily political in content."[69]

*Inferno* is, by the way, not the last time the sexual sin against nature figures in the *Comedy*. In Canto 26 of *Purgatorio*, the pilgrim encounters sodomites among the Lustful on the Seventh Terrace. In a ground-breaking 1991 essay on sodomy in the last two canticles, Joseph Pequigney mounted a vigorous argument distancing Dante from "erotophobic theologians" and arguing that in *Purgatorio* it is no longer a crime of violence, but one of "excessive love" and homosexuals are included on a par with heterosexuals among the lustful.[70] Pequigney argues that Lust for Dante has nothing to do with sexual difference: instead, it is seduction—what we might now call "grooming"—which is "the most opprobrious trespass." Both homosexuals and heterosexuals err when they love objects of carnal desire more than God. This is shown in *Inferno*'s Paolo and Francesca episode (In5:100-102), about which Pequigney observes that sexual appetite is bad only when immoderately indulged. Dante argues instead for "elective love"—love of God through the exercise of intellect and free will. [71]

Several years after Pequigney's article appeared, Bruce Holsinger argued even more cheekily for a more inclusive, *i.e.*, Whitmanic, approach to sexual preference in Dante.[72] He declares at the outset that the *Comedy* is "an exilic critique" that is "transgressive—politically poetically, theologically and sexually." He calls *Inferno* a "quintessential premodern meditation on the closet." This venue, he says, is cast as a *carcere* or prison. Holsinger suggests that in the *Comedy* the homoerotic subject is the reader, as he is so often in *Leaves*.

He also extends Pequigney's riff on the Ganymede vision with one of his own, calling it "a dreamed fantasy of homoerotic ravishment": the rape is "ultimately a Christian *raptus* modeled on St. Paul's experience in *2 Corinthians*—and a clear foreshadowing of the pilgrim's rapture at the end of *Paradiso*. Toward the end of *Purgatorio*, the pilgrim comes finally into his own being, and the moment is very much like the parting of poet and reader at the end of "Song of Myself." The final vanishment of Virgil, Holsinger observes, is heavy with the weight of homoerotic loss. The pilgrim pines: "Virgil had deprived us of himself, / Virgil, the gentlest father, Virgil, he / to whom I gave my self for my salvation." This coincides with the *sole* appearance of the author's name in the *Comedy*, as the pilgrim's new tutor Beatrice warns him not to give in to emotion: "Dante, though Virgil's leaving you, do not / yet weep, do not weep yet" (Pu30:49-56). You must, that is, now search for your perfect comrade under your boot soles.

But what of sexual difference in the *Comedy*'s final canticle? Surely, the boldest sexually inclusive reading of *Paradiso*—and the most compatible with Walt's views on sex—came in 2005 from James Miller in an essay titled "Rainbow Bodies," in which he argues vigorously for "Dante's unorthodox respect for the Sodomites."[73] In this essay "on Dante's (still) highly unorthodox response to sexual difference" (9), Miller emphasizes that the spinal underlying question of the *Comedy* is: "How does the fleshly body figure in the traditionally spiritual quest for human perfection?" (253). As we have already seen, Dante's answer is the same as Walt's: it is crucially necessary, a *sine qua non*. Miller urges us to accept Dante's "advanced thinking on sexual difference," and he even argues that Dante "boldly allegorizes the psychological concept of 'sexual orientation' for the first time in Western literature" (271-72). Miller trains sharp gaydar on the *Comedy* here. For instance, in one of Dante's most charming images the three Florentine sodomites of *Inferno* scrutinize the pilgrim: "knitting their brows at us / The way old tailors do when threading needles" (In15:20-21 Pinsky). Miller's take is that this "gay male gaze" disconcerts the pilgrim when he "feels uncomfortably 'cruised' (*adocchiato*) on the sterile plain of the Sodomites" (252).

When we and the pilgrim arrive in *Paradiso*, according to Miller, both sexual difference and the Closet have vanished just as magically as Virgil did in *Purgatorio*: "For secrecy and sneakiness are necessarily absent from the circles of telepathic souls dancing around Beatrice. How can there be closetry, Miller asks, in a zone of divine *libertà* where everyone is mentally 'out' to everyone else?" (274). Throughout *Paradiso* "same-sex desire is alive and well," Miller sums up; "there's something for everybody up there" (278).[74]

Miller makes much of the appearance of Charles Martel in the Third

Sphere of Venus in *Paradiso*. Martel was heir to the King of Naples, and six years younger than Dante, and he met the poet on a visit to Florence in 1294. Dante was apparently much impressed and must have sorrowed when Martel died at age 24 the next year. For he is fondly remembered by the pilgrim in *Paradiso*: Martel's shade says there, "The world held me / briefly below; but had my stay been longer, / much evil that will be, would not have been" (Pa8:49-51). Miller handles this appearance wittily: "Martel descends on cue from the venereal clouds. Sidling up to Dante, Charles has one of the great pick-up lines in the *Comedy*." Miller then quotes Martel's beckoning words: "We all are ready at your pleasure, / so that you may receive delight from us . . . Our love is so complete—to bring / you joy, brief respite will not be less sweet" (see Pa8:32-39).[75] The rhetorical climax of Miller's exploration of "the erotics of diversity at play in *Paradiso*" ends in rousing fashion: "Instead of a Foucaultian nightmare of proliferating sexualities under the orthodox regime of heterosexual discourse, Paradise opens up for Dante the high fantasy of a single polymorphously diverse sexuality under the unorthodox sign of the rainbow" (282).[76] Or, as the first line of Walt's poem "Kosmos" has it, a true kosmos "includes diversity and is Nature" (*LG 1892*, 303). Walt's Kosmos—like Dante's, Miller believes—has "the amplitude of the earth, and the coarseness and sexuality of the earth."

The subject of Dante and Walt on sexuality can be closed for now by looking at one of the *Comedy*'s most tantalizing images drawn from real life. It comes as Ser Brunetto vanishes from the pilgrim's sight:

> And then he turned and seemed like one of those
> who race across the fields to win the green
> cloth at Verona; of those runners, he
> appeared to be the winner, not the loser. (In15:121-24)

The reference here is to the *palio*, an annual athletic contest staged in countless Italian cities. The most famous one, in Siena, was run with horses; the one in Verona was in Dante's time run by naked men, and the winner received a green *drappo*—the booby prize was a rooster, or should one say cock?

Obviously, this gesture seems to suggest Dante's view that being a sodomite was not incompatible with being a "winner." It perhaps also foreshadows the pilgrim fantasizing about being awarded the supreme green laurel of victory in *Paradiso* (see Pa25:1-9). But there is another subtle, wry possibility: Dante is hinting that Brunetto's sexual tastes would be gratified to watch a naked runner in action.[77] As it happens, there is a perfect Whitman poem for this moment, probably also inspired by a real-life Adonis:

*The Runner*

On a flat road runs the well-train'd runner,
He is lean and sinewy with muscular legs,
He is thinly clothed, he leans forward as he runs,
With lightly closed fists and arms partially rais'd. (*LG 1892*, 217)

## *Soul-Searcher: Metamorphoses and Evolution*

Dante and Walt were journeymen, life-long seekers after the *diritta via* in a challenging world; their masterworks describe the desire-driven urge to find passage to ultimate joy. This is a personal joy, the joy of the individual soul: "O the joy of my soul leaning pois'd on itself," as Walt exhilarates in "A Song of Joys" (*LG 1892*, 146). There is also a Dantesque flare in Walt's exclamation in "Passage to India": "Greater than stars or suns, / Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth" (*LG 1892*, 322). The pilgrim tells the reader, as *Paradiso* begins, that this thirst for ultimate personal knowledge is "innate and everlasting" (*concreata e perpetüa* Pa2:19). Walt expressed this driven soul-searching often, most vividly when he speaks of "my soul hungering gymnastic" and of his "hungering, hungering, hungering, for primal energies" ("Rise O Days" *LG 1892*, 228, 230). In his 1856 poem "Assurances" Whitman staked out early the primacy of his own soul: "I need no assurances, I am a man who is pre-occupied of his own soul" (*LG 1892*, 342). Even at his debut in "Song of Myself" Walt begins by asserting "I loafe and invite my soul" and "Clear and sweet is my soul" and "I believe in you my soul" (*LG 1892*, 29, 31, 32).

This soul-searching can be satisfied only through life's passage to self-discovery. That is perhaps why Dante places in *Inferno* Ulysses, whose Homeric story was then seen as an allegory of the education of the soul. There he utters these heroic words to his crew before a fearsome sea journey:

Consider well the seed that gave you birth:
you were not made to live your lives as brutes,
but to be followers of worth and knowledge. (In26:118-20)[78]

Dante places Ulysses, an avatar of intellectual freedom, in Hell because his pilgrim is experiencing his own dark journey in this canticle. The pilgrim will tread the long open road to spiritual fulfillment in the *Comedy*, precisely as Whitman traversed his *Leaves*: "I tramp a perpetual journey . . . My signs are

a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods" (*LG 1892*, 73). Then he tells his reader (much as Dante implies in his poem): "Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself." Whitman elsewhere describes what he feels about those who shirk their own fearful journey of the soul:

> . . . the young man who composedly peril'd his life and
> lost it has done exceedingly well for himself without doubt,
> . . . he who never peril'd his life, but retains it to old age
> in riches and ease, has probably achiev'd nothing for himself
> worth mentioning. ("Song of Prudence" *LG 1892*, 291)

That soul-searching is a personal, ultimately joyful, but harrowing process Dante makes abundantly clear. So does Walt, notably in "A Song of Joys":

> Yet O my soul supreme!
> Know'st thou the joys of pensive thought?
> Joys of the free and lonesome heart, the tender, gloomy heart?
> Joys of the solitary walk, the spirit bow'd yet proud, the suffering
> and the struggle . . . (*LG 1892*, 147)

That phrase "bow'd yet proud" captures the experience of both Dante and his pilgrim.

The *Comedy* narrates a deeply introspective soul-searching journey into the unknown. Walt unwittingly compresses its plot into just three lines: "Darest thou now O soul, / Walk out with me toward the unknown region, / Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow" (*LG 1892*, 338). Journeys—especially the perilous ones—take both space and time, and they all must unfold in veiled, obscure places, like Hell, and in "the impenetrable blank of the future" (*LG 1892*, 349). Since both Dante and Walt knew the importance of being earnest about serious matters, the journeys of their protagonist and readers were goal-driven. All soul-searchers have the same hope, which is expressed by St. Bernard: "That you / may consummate your journey perfectly" (Pa31:94-95). Walt was a perfectionist, too. "Perfect" is a word he uses often: there are perfect lovers, comrades, mothers, love, health, men, women, nonchalance, pismires, genitals, sanity, Italian tenors, physique, pilots—even perfect miracles. And Dante and Walt also had a taste for perfect endings.

That is why both often fell back on the metaphor of life as a voyage, always with the clear goal of a final "safe harbor" in mind. For Dante it was a journey toward sanctification; for Walt it was achieving a fully inhabited and celebrated

self, perhaps also a "Lover divine and perfect Comrade" ("Gods" *LG 1892*, 213). Dante begins his pilgrim's first approach to the precincts of Paradise with a fine image of the *barca* we all float in on life's ocean: "O you who are within your little bark, / eager to listen, following behind / my ship." Then the author warns: "do not / attempt to sail the seas I sail; you may, / by losing sight of me, be left astray" (Pa2:1-6). Whitman doted on this metaphor—most famously in his Lincoln homage "O Captain! My Captain!"—but also in his poems on Columbus and poems like "Aboard at a Ship's Helm" ("Ship of the body, ship of the soul, voyaging, voyaging"—*LG 1892*, 205) or "Passage to India" ("Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!"—*LG 1892*, 322).[79]

One of the main lessons J. A. Symonds found in his study of Dante is that "We know that all real life is fluid, subtle, changeful, active."[80] Walt came to a rather similar perspective, a point made in a short passage from *Specimen Days*, titled "The Great Unrest of Which We Are Part" (his phrasing has a Dantean feel): "My thoughts went floating on vast and mythic currents" as he idled at Timber Creek, a favorite site for meditation near his Camden home. He was mulling over a "never-achiev'd poem" about "the two impetuses of man and the universe—in the latter, creation's incessant unrest, exfoliation (Darwin's evolution, I suppose). Indeed, what is Nature but change, in all its visible, and still more invisible processes? Or what is humanity in its faith, love, heroism, poetry, even morals, but *emotion*?" (*CPW*, 196-197). This is another way of saying that, like Dante, the *processes* that interested Whitman were both visible and invisible—and that their relationship is always fluid and subject to "vast mythic currents."

The notion of change as a part of life—especially that ultimate change from life to death—is captured in one of Walt's often very Dantean Civil War poems, about the speaker "wandering" in the war-scape of a Virginia *selva oscura* and coming upon a soldier's newly dug grave. He will continue to wander through "Many a changeful season to follow, and many a scene of life," but he will never forget the inscription on this unknown soldier's grave: "*Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade*" ("As Toilsome I Wander'd Virginia's Woods" *LG 1892*, 240-241). That inscription, we know, had a special personal resonance for Walt, whose search for a loving comrade of his own lasted much his life. This inscription, writ small, does what the *Comedy* and *Leaves* do as a whole: record in words the experience and memories of a fluid, real life. Then, after being gathered together, these memories finally became books—masterworks that will live for "ever so many generations hence." Or, as Walt hoped even more boldly: "See, projected through time, / For me an audience interminable" (*LG 1892*,

19). After 800 years Dante seems to have attracted the same kind of audience.

Symonds's emphasis on "fluid" life in Dante is perceptive, for the image of flowing water is crucial to the climax of *Paradiso*. There, God is styled as "the eternal fountain" of grace and happiness (Pa31:93), and Mary is praised by St. Bernard as "a living spring of hope" (Pa33:12). God's grace and the prospect of hope can never become standing water but must flow forever. Likewise in Whitman, flowing water is salutary and sanitary, especially when it is free to flow, not left stagnating and vulnerable to contamination: "I announce the great individual, fluid as Nature" ("*So Long!*" *LG 1892*, 381). Freedom opposes stagnation, as Walt says in his Dantean poem "Gods": "To break the stagnant tie—thee, thee to free, O soul" (*LG 1892*, 213). Of the toll-free open road—where traffic flows freely and the landscape constantly changes—he says, "Here rises the fluid and attaching character" (*LG 1892*, 124). In the far-flung thirty-third section of "Song of Myself," Walt fantasizes the ultimate open road: he projects a kind of Superman, performing orbic surveillance. He boasts ebulliently, "I fly those flights of a fluid and swallowing soul" (*LG 1892*, 58).

Two other Whitman poems express a Dantean impetus toward perfecting one's spirit through fluid change. One, "As They Draw to a Close" of 1871, finds him in his well-practiced valedictory mode, explaining how his "precedent songs" came to be:

> Through Space and Time fused in a chant, and the flowing
> eternal identity,
> To Nature encompassing these, encompassing God—to the
> joyous, electric all . . . (*LG 1892*, 379)

That phrasing has the flavor of Dante's *Paradiso*, as does the last short line—"With you O soul."—which reunites us again with the *Comedy*'s pilgrim. This poem is far from Walt's best, but the other one adumbrates Dante and is superb. "Sparkles from the Wheel" (*LG 1892*, 301) focuses our attention on a knife-grinder at work on a city street. Watching this commonplace sight, the observing poet eerily departs from his earthly body: "Myself effusing and fluid, a phantom curiously floating, now here absorb'd and arrested." Transfixed by the sparks, he begins to hallucinate: "Diffusing, dropping, sideways-darting, in tiny showers of gold, / Sparkles from the wheel." Those sparks are exactly like the thousand shining golden angels' wings we are invited to picture in the last tercets of *Paradiso*. "I help myself to material and immaterial," Walt asserted at the beginning of his career (*LG 1892*, 58); he is doing that here—just as Dante did throughout the *Comedy*, through the hallucination of poetry.

The two poets are focused on change and, more specifically, self-change. We have already seen Dante's pilgrim boast about his mercurial nature (Pa5:98-99) and Walt's contradictoriness is famous. This is why words that denote *process* are vital to understanding their message: awakening, regeneration, revolution, transformation, evolution. All of these require intellectual and spiritual perambulation. Dante ransacked Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in his writing, just as the end-result of pupal metamorphosis—the butterfly—became Walt's chosen icon. And both men erred on the side of optimism about the end result of most all change. At the beginning of *Paradiso*, Dante hints at the blinding enlightenment that is in store for us: "Great fire can follow a small spark: there may / be better voices after me" (Pa1:34-35).[81] This is one of many hints that Dante was himself very conscious he was entering a race for literary fame.[82]

Dante was cordial to the science of astronomy, we have seen, but evolutionary science was far beyond his ken. The science of evolution came into being in Walt's lifetime, however, and he eagerly embraced it.[83] To Traubel he enthused about "the sweet, the gracious, the sovereign, Darwin . . . the most significant, farthest-influencing, life of the age" (*WWWC* 3:70).[84] It is fitting that evolution lies at the center of "L. of G.'s Purport," the thumbnail summary of his career composed near its end:

> Haughty this song, its words and scope,
> To span vast realms of space and time,
> Evolution—the cumulative—growths and generations. (*LG 1892*, 420)

A short later poem, a memory poem, reinforces the evolutionary through-line of Whitman's life and art and happens to have a strong Dantean tinge to it: "Going Somewhere." It reports a speech lauding evolution uttered to him by Anne Gilchrist—"My science-friend, my noblest woman-friend"—now dead.[85] She opined about the "sum" of learning—"Of all Geologies—Histories—of all Astronomy —of Evolution"—show "we all are onward, onward, speeding slowly, surely bettering." Then she concludes:

> "The world, the race, the soul—in space and time the universes,
> All bound as is befitting each—all surely going somewhere." (*LG 1892*, 397)

The long life-quest, the Humboldtian benevolence in the phrase "surely bettering," the cosmic scope of "universes," the goal-driven (not recreational) emphasis of "surely going somewhere"—all these are hallmarks of the *Comedy*. That striking oxymoron "speeding slowly" well captures the simultaneous capacious-

ness and earnestness of both poets' masterpieces.

One final instance of the alignment of Dante's and Walt's spiritual seeking remains to be noted. Symonds wrote that, in composing *Paradiso*, Dante needed a "Christian mystagogue," and Beatrice performs superbly this role of guide into the mystery of sanctification and God's grace (*Introduction*, 129). Walt, in the 1874 poem "Song of the Universal," asks his muse to produce a "mystic evolution"—not a bad paraphrase for what Dante's pilgrim experiences as the *Comedy* unfolds. Such a formal invocation to a muse would seem hopelessly old-fashioned and "feudal" for Whitman, but it is certainly Dante's style: all three canticles of the *Comedy* begin with a formal invocation. Walt's muse in this poem here seems to have Dante's flare for stars-besotted cosmic soul-searching:

> Yet again, lo! the soul, above all science,
> For it has history gather'd like husks around the globe,
> For it the entire star-myriads roll through the sky. (*LG 1892*, 181)

## *Freedom and Free Will*

The thirst for freedom is established early in the *Comedy*. Virgil chides the pilgrim in *Inferno*'s second canto, "Why be a coward rather than bolder, freer . . . " Then he has him contemplate three "blessed ladies": the Virgin Mary, the martyred third-century virgin Lucy, the patron saint of illumination, and Beatrice. This has a splendid effect: "Good courage coursing through my heart, I spoke / Like one set free" (In2:99-107 Pinsky). The oppressing weight of incarceration hangs over the denizens of Hell, and courage will be necessary to resist its visceral terrors. *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* will instill more intellectual courage in the pilgrim; Virgil, then Beatrice, will help him deploy his free will more rationally. In mid-*Purgatorio* Virgil lectures,

> Even if we allow necessity
> as source for every love that flames in you,
> the power to curb that love is still your own. (Pu18:70-72)

Indeed, Virgil's last words to Dante are, "Your will is free, erect, and whole—to act / against your will would be to err" (Pu27:140-41).

The enemy of free will is the notion of predestination. But *nothing* is predestined, as Dante in *Paradiso* is told by an invisible God—though, somehow he can tell this God is wearing a "smile"—"but this does not imply necessity, /

just as a ship that sails downstream is not / determined by the eye that watches it" (Pa17:40-42). The context is droll since it comes just before Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida prophesies both Dante's future tribulations but also his becoming an honored poet: Dante's own free will and true grit will be needed to bring forth the *Comedy*.[86] This foundational freedom of self-definition is embedded throughout *Leaves*. "The hopples fall from your ankles, you find an unfailing sufficiency," Walt tantalizes (*LG 1892*, 188).[87]

Though he has much to say in praise of freedom, Whitman never uses the phrase "free will" in *Leaves*, though he uses the more Latinate "volition." He refers in a *Calamus* poem to "my wilful and savage soul's volition" (*LG 1892*, 100), and in a Civil War poem, Walt has a Poet declare: "I'll pour the verse with streams of blood, full of volition, full of joy" (*LG 1892*, 223). Perhaps the most vivid description of the exercise of free will in all of Whitman comes in "Prayer of Columbus," transparently alluding to himself:

> The urge, the ardor, the unconquerable will,
> The potent, felt, interior command, stronger than words,
> A message from the Heavens whispering to me even in sleep,
> These sped me on. (*LG 1892*, 324)

These lines could serve to describe the kind of vocational impetus the exile Dante felt as he commenced on his pilgrim's story. And always, coursing beneath the surface for Dante and Walt, is an awareness that free will must be shared by all citizens, the core of their political agenda: "For the great Idea, the idea of perfect and free individuals, / For that, the bard walks in advance, leader of leaders" (*LG 1892*, 270).

Beatrice does not stint in her praise of free will: "The greatest gift the magnanimity / of God, as He created, gave . . . was the freedom of the will." Free will, she adds, is man's "treasure" (*tesoro*). But she immediately warns: "those beings that have intellect—all these / and none but these—receive" the gift (Pa5:19-30). That is, this gift must be used rationally, responsibly.[88] This is a premise of *Leaves* as well, though mainly in the context of his fellow Americans using their free will to defend Democracy. In his origin-story poem, he loudly declares "The greatness of Love and Democracy, and the greatness of Religion" ("Starting from Paumanok" *LG 1892*, 25).[89] In a later poem, when Whitman was well on his way to becoming the self-appointed poet of Democracy, he made a formal will-like declaration that "all my songs—behind me leaving" are but "Souvenirs of Democracy." At the poem's end he affixed his familiar signature.[90]

Such a proud democrat as Whitman might have been pleased to learn that

the beginnings of Florentine democracy arose in about 1250 with the establishment of the *primo popolo*. McCarthy says this "democratic tendency, among the poorer artists, appeared very early in Florence," a response to "the pride of the nobles and the greed of the burghers" (*The Stones of Florence*, 39). She also notes that the first democratic government immediately ordered that many vanity-driven architectural towers of the city erected by wealthy families be reduced in height by over half. These scary, looming towers appear in *Inferno* (see In31:20-30). This *demos* vs. *aristos* class warfare sounds very similar to the warfare Whitman condemned in post-Civil War America in *Democratic Vistas*.[91]

The climactic note struck by the *Comedy* and *Leaves* is one of escape from the infernal incarceration of the self that is created by the quotidian world around us—inhabited by our "me"—and an escape into visionary freedom for the "real Me" inside us all. This explains Walt's, and Dante's, "rage divine for liberty" ("O Star of France" *LG 1892*, 308).

## *The Dilation of Pride*

Dante and Walt were both outliers from their thirteenth-century Florentine and nineteenth-century American worlds. In Dante's case, one can exactly date the origin of his spirit of resistance: 10 March 1302, when he was condemned to death by the Republic.[92] There is a line from "Song of Myself" that seems to capture the psychological effect of Dante's exile: "For me the man that is proud and feels how it stings to be slighted" (*LG 1892*, 34). This condemnation to exile, however, became a kind of *felix culpa*, for from it emerged the *Comedy*. (Dante chose his title because the action of his story would have met the classical definition of comedy: *turbulenta prima, tranquilla ultima*.) That is why Whitman's splendid poetic description of the results of composting is so suitable to Dante's epic: "It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions . . . It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor . . . It gives such divine materials to men" ("This Compost" *LG 1892*, 287). Likewise, the 1855 *Leaves* was an explosion of counter-cultural resistance. The preface's opening image of a snake's sloughed skin and the culture-razing opening poem "Song of Myself" administered a well-deserved shock to the nation's sensibilities. Walt's Dantean *risorgimento* and party-of-one instincts were on full display: "A new order shall arise . . . and every man shall be his own priest" (xi).[93]

Both poets were accused at first of the original and deadliest of all the sins, pride (*superbia, orgoglio)*. Boccaccio records that "our poet had a haughty

and proud disposition."[94] Symonds acknowledged that this sin was his "chief fault," but he also says the *Comedy* "faithfully depicts a stubborn character in its mental strength and moral dignity" (*Introduction*, 159, 139). This raises an obvious question: *is* pride such a terrible sin? With our two poets, answering that question is tricky. Biblical aphorisms will not help us much: "pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate" (Proverbs 8:13) or "A man's pride shall bring him low: but honor shall uphold the humble in spirit" (Proverbs 29:23). Both poets had notoriously froward mouths and far from humble spirits. Though they both consciously chose to write in the *genus humile*, they could exchange humility with pungent acerbity when moved. Symonds ventured, in fact, that Dante was "pre-eminently a satirist" (*Introduction*, 140), and there is plenty of pugnacious social, political satire in *Leaves* and the prose essays and prefaces—but especially in Walt's private mouthing-off recorded by Horace Traubel.

The standard Satanic pride is present in the *Comedy*, of course. One sees it in the Florentines whose former "courtesy and valor" have been driven out by the proud "excess and arrogance" of the city's latest *nouveau riche* newcomers (In16:66-74). It is also seen in the proud old Florentine families now laid low by Ghibelline and Guelph factions—"so arrogant and dragonlike"—infesting the city (Pa16:110-15). Dante's nostalgia for an ideal Florence of the past is mirrored in Whitman's juvenalian screed *Democratic Vistas*, which attacks an America utterly lacking in "interior or spiritual life," drowning in "the huge flow of our age's materialism," and steeped in "Pride, competition, segregation, vicious wilfulness, and license beyond example" (53, 55, 70).

However, existing alongside this society-destroying pride chastised by both Dante and Walt is the splendid pride of the individual—and the *poet*—who is heroically dedicated to building an orbically centered personality, society, city, and nation. Walt characteristically hails this brand of *amour propre*: "The soul has that measureless pride which revolts from every lesson but its own" (*LG 1892*, 291). The pride of our two poets in their vocation is also hard to resist. Perhaps the best example of this is in Limbo when "four giant shades," Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan, welcome the pilgrim and Virgil (In4:83). Such a distinguished fraternity might then have seemed temerarious—like Shakespeare's boast in his Sonnet 55 that he would rivet "the eyes of all posterity"—but, eight centuries on, Dante's pride of affiliation now seems well justified. Perhaps he was also thinking of himself when, well on course for Paradise, the pilgrim finds himself in the Sphere of Mercury, among the souls who achieved righteous aims—notably, those fostering the public good—but who were also motivated to gain "honor"

and "fame" (Pa6:112-13). Dante's final example of such a soul is Romeo de Villeneuve (d.1250), a servant whose loyalty was miserably requited with exile and a life of poverty (see Pa6:139-42). This is far from the only moment poignant autobiography seeps into the *Comedy*.

Dante was, to Symonds, "free of false deference to authority and opinion" (*Introduction*, 154). Such pride of mind is frequently expressed by Whitman—it is also a Quaker trait. Compared with Dante, Walt's assertions of his pride are unminced and hearty, and he hoped this self-reliance would be contagious, as he announced in one of his introductory *Inscriptions* cluster poems, "Thou Reader," a rare two-liner:

> Thou reader throbbest life and pride and love the same as I,
> Therefore for thee the following chants. (*LG 1892*, 18)

The same conviction figures in his *Leaves* sign-off poem "*So Long!*": "I announce the justification of candor and the justification of pride" (*LG 1892*, 380). Dante, as he hints often in his *Comedy*, smarted bitterly at his long adult life of exile and deprivation—subsisting on the kindness of various wealthy strangers, treading their stairs as he wrote about the stairway to heaven. Swallowing his pride, in other words. He puts his misery into heart-felt words in his ancestor Cacciaguida's prophecy in *Paradiso*:

> You shall leave everything you love most dearly:
> this is the arrow that the bow of exile
> shoots first. You are to know the bitter taste
> of others' bread, how salt it is, and know
> how hard a path it is for one who goes
> descending and ascending others' stairs. (Pa17:55-60)[95]

One of Dante's motivations while trying to master his injured pride was the sweet revenge of literary fame. The Lear-like pride at having endured the storms of life through sheer resilience hangs over the work of both our poets. This "I'm still here!" pride of survival is especially marked in Whitman's "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life." The poem confesses the outlier's burden—"baffled, balk'd bent to the very earth"—his "arrogant poems" eliciting "peals of distant ironical laughter," all too aware of the gossipy "blab" that "recoils upon me." Dante must have felt similar scorn from his former Florentine enemies in his outposts of exile. But Whitman instead steeled himself to resist, responding with pride. He declared he was "Held by this electric self out of the pride of which I utter poems" (*LG 1892*, 202). Through it all he will be a rock: "the

real Me stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd."[96] Dante must have steeled himself the same way.

If there is one poem that captures Dante's spirit of resistance, it is Walt's "Me Imperturbe" (*LG 1892*, 16), yet another poem that Walt eventually put in his self-describing entry-cluster *Inscriptions*: "Me imperturbe, standing at ease in Nature, / Master of all or mistress of all, aplomb in the midst of irrational things." Here is the *cri de coeur* of all exiles: "O to be self-balanced for contingencies / To confront night, storms, hunger, ridicule, accidents, rebuffs, as the trees and animals do." This pride of endurance we have already seen in the "potent, felt, interior command" of "Prayer of Columbus" (*LG 1892*, 323). The pride of Dante and Walt also rests on the spiritual and intellectual freedom of perambulation, the desire to travel. Dante's real exile and Walt's more figurative one nurtured this urge. Voyagers appealed to both: Ulysses, who makes such a moving appearance in *Inferno* (Canto 26), and Columbus.

One other Walt poem, a later one, also aligns him with Dante's pride in the poet's vocation: "When the Full-Grown Poet Came" (*LG 1892*, 416). Here he pictures himself the "poet" joining Nature and the Soul of man—"proud, jealous, and unreconciled." He takes Nature and the Soul by the hand, "as blender, uniter, tightly holding hands / Which he will never release until he reconciles the two, / And wholly and joyously blends them" (*LG 1892*, 416). This poem, once again, is premised on the strong Dantean narrative nexus between a soul's long journey, the poet's proud vocation, and the urge to "bundle" rather than splinter or factionalize humanity.

Pride turns up in rather good company in a Whitman reminiscence that appeared in his faux-autobiography *Specimen Days*. This occurred shortly after receiving in the mail a book harping on "the Theory of Poetry," which he soon put down as "a bad job." And yet, it started him thinking: "The play of Imagination, with the sensuous objects of Nature for symbols, and Faith—with Love and Pride as the unseen impetus and moving-power of all, make up the curious chess-game of a poem" (*CPW*, 198).[97] Faith, Love, and Pride—that is a very Dantean Trivium.

## *The Fountain of Love*

Finally, it is Love—or, theologically, charity—that makes the worlds of Dante and Walt go round. Love is often associated with that other four-letter word, hope. In fact, Dante gives hope a color, the very same color Walt gave to the

"hopeful green stuff" of his disposition in "Song of Myself" (*LG 1892*, 33). Just before beginning to ascend Mount Purgatory, the pilgrim is told by the shade of Manfred, who was wrongfully excommunicated: "there is no one / so lost that the eternal love cannot / return—as long as hope shows something green" (Pu3:133-35). Hope for God's eternal love is a powerful driver on the pilgrim's journey. Hope (*speranza*) is the *lingua franca* throughout *Purgatorio*. That is why, as Eliot observed, "The souls in Purgatory suffer because they wish to suffer."[98]

The *Comedy* begins with the sun rising "in fellowship with the stars"—just as "Divine Love first moved those things of beauty." The "hour and the gentle season" also give the pilgrim "good cause for hopefulness" (In1:37-42).[99] Those stars will soon vanish, for once the pilgrim reaches Hell, its "starless air" is noted (In3:23); indeed, there is no sky at all. Light and love will return spectacularly later in the *Comedy*, as when the pilgrim gazes upon Paradise:

> There I saw faces given up to love—
> graced with Another's light and their own smile—
> and movements graced with every dignity. (Pa31:49-51)

And so will the stars also return. The very last tercet of Dante's poem finds the pilgrim-poet at a loss for words one last time, but *not* at a loss for the word "love":

> Here force failed my high fantasy; but my
> desire and will were moved already—like
> a wheel revolving uniformly—by
> the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.
> (Pa33:142-45)

Some cantos earlier, the pilgrim exchanges his *diritta via* image for a marine one, expressing relief that he has escaped "from the sea of twisted love" (*amor torto*) and is finally "on the shore of the right love" (*diritto . . . riva*). He is now firmly in love with the "Eternal Gardener" (Pa26:62-63).[100]

Love courses through *Leaves of Grass* just as thoroughly. *Love(s)* and *lover(s)* appear nearly 300 times in its poems. The primacy of love is most notably exalted—in cosmic Dantean style—in "The Mystic Trumpeter": "No other theme but love—knitting, enclosing, all-diffusing love . . . love, that is the sun and moon and stars" (*LG 1892*, 357). In his iconic debut poem, Walt declares that "a kelson of the creation is love" (*LG 1892*, 32). This could almost serve as the central thesis of the *Comedy*. A kelson—variant of keelson—is the longitudinal timber strengthening the keel of a ship's hull. The image is perfect,

for the metaphor of life as a voyage and the individual as a voyager is often deployed by Dante and Walt.[101] Love is the kelson of the creation, as Beatrice tells the pilgrim in Paradise: "to live in love is—here—a necessity" (Pa3:77).

Love is the bond that so often makes of Walt and his reader one "bundle." Love unites not only body and soul, but also life and death in his poetry. In the *Comedy*, love is the bond which makes possible the comradery between Virgil's shade and the living pilgrim, as the pilgrim later learns in *Paradiso*: "Both that which never dies [the soul] and that which dies [the body] / are only the reflected light of that / Idea, which our Sire, with Love, begets" (Pa13:52-54). Walt declares to his reader, "Your true soul and body appear before me," and shortly after he also confides, "I have loved many women and men, but I love none better than you" (*LG 1892*, 186). We know Walt was very conscious he would be communicating from the dead to the living—to "men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence" (*LG 1892*, 130). He made this crystal clear in the last lines of "*So Long!*" where love looms large: "I love you, I depart from materials, / I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead" (*LG 1892*, 382).[102] These could be the parting words of Virgil's *ombra* in *Purgatorio*.

As Dante does, Walt makes much of the incarnate Christ as the supreme example of God's love. The section devoted to Him in "Chanting the Square Deific"—a very Dantesque performance—Christ identifies himself as the bringer of a very Whitmanic "kiss of affection" and "all-enclosing Charity," the very same gift the *Comedy* brings. This section's last lines, like those last cantos of *Paradiso*, are focused on love: "my sweet love bequeath'd here and elsewhere never dies" (*LG 1892*, 339).[103]

Whitman and Christ are both ecumenical—"allowers of all theologies." This was in a sense true of Dante as well. He famously made enemies of popes and their ecclesiastic/theological henchmen, and one scholar has recently argued he was a poet of "freewheeling expansions of Catholicism."[104] Dante and Walt were both employing their own inner light, well beyond the boundaries of ordinary theology or philosophy. Specific church figures are often scathed in Dante's verse, but we know next to nothing about his private thoughts. With Walt we are much luckier, thanks to Horace Traubel and his nine volumes of conversations recorded verbatim. There we hear him rage—"Damn the preachers! . . . the smooth-faced, self-satisfied preachers" (*WWWC* 6:298)—or grumble: "The church has not bothered me—I do not bother the church: that is a clean cut bargain" (*WWWC* 1:11). This was because Whitman was generally averse to getting mired in what Dante refers to as "syllogistic reasonings" and elaborate systems or arguments. As Walt asserted early on, "I and mine do not convince

by arguments, similes, rhymes, / We convince by our presence" (*LG 1892*, 126). Like Dante, he preferred ecstasy to lucubration: "Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth" (*LG 1892*, 32). The primacy of love in Walt's cosmos was reiterated in Dantean style when he made a "full confession" for his 1876 *Leaves*: "I also sent out *Leaves of Grass* to arouse and set flowing in men's and women's hearts, young and old, endless streams of living, pulsating love and friendship, directly from them to myself, now and forever."[105]

The Dantesque journey of the individual human soul to Christ—and thence to a universe ruled by love—is splendidly captured in Walt's 1871 poem "The Base of All Metaphysics." It begins with an old professor closing his "crowded course." He drones on about "those Greek and Germanic systems" and boasts of "Christ divine having studied long." Then, in a very brief peroration, the poet manages to dilate, a favorite word for both Walt and Dante, the concept of Christ far beyond mere theology or philosophy into a universe ruled by love:

> . . . underneath Christ the divine I see,
> The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction
> of friend to friend,
> Of the well-married husband and wife, of children
> and parents,
> Of city for city and land for land. (*LG 1892*, 102)

This is astonishingly like the ecstatic "bundling" of love on the final page of the *Comedy*:

> In its profundity I saw—ingathered
> and bound by love into one single volume—
> what in the universe, seems separate, scattered . . . (Pa33:85-87)

## *Some Dantean Poems from Walt*

Countless poems in *Leaves of Grass*, we have now seen, contain fleeting resonances of Dante's *Comedy*. But several poems in *Leaves* stand out as more elaborately evocative of the poets' shared views of their selves, their vocation, their moral conscience, and the cosmos. As this journey nears its end, a sampling of these Dantean performances will help to emphasize their close alignment.

## "Passage to India"

Tucked into the seldom-cited "Pioneer! O Pioneers!" of 1865 is a perfect synopsis of the *Comedy*'s spinal narrative:

> I too with my soul and body,
> We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way,
> Through these shores amid the shadows, with the apparitions pressing,
> Pioneers! O pioneers! (*LG 1892*, 185)

Dante's "curious trio," of course, consists of the pilgrim, Virgil, and the reader. The *Comedy* unfolds their "wandering" search for the *diritta via* among "shadows" and "apparitions"; they are finally able to navigate a passage to spiritual perfection. Perhaps no Whitman poem more fully captures this journey of the individual soul than "Passage to India" (*LG 1892*, 315-323), which appeared several years after "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" The entire poem is an apostrophe to Walt's own soul; early on he says, "Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?" This will remind us of Dante's soul-thirsty pilgrimage to Paradise. Walt here also likens Christianity's first souls, Adam and Eve, to his own soul: "Wandering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations, / With questionings, baffled." This is yet another uncanny synopsis of the *Comedy*'s focal narrative.

Dante and Walt, we have seen, were both in the end devoted to bringing Good News. Both, in Walt's words, were poets who intended to "double the cape of Good Hope to some purpose" (*LG 1892*, 319). The climax of the *Comedy* is filled with the same optimism that Walt revealed at his debut, when he defined grass as the "hopeful green stuff" of his personality (*LG 1892*, 33). This almost paraphrases *Purgatorio*: "there is no one / so lost that the eternal love cannot / return—as long as hope shows something green" (Pu3:133-35). Later in "Passage," Walt promises a rapturous climax to life's journey in theological terms that also display a Dantean poet's pride: "Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and compacted by the true son of God, the poet" (*LG 1892*, 319). This assertion might remind us of Beatrice's description of the dazzling pageant of Good News that ends *Paradiso*.

The main thrust of the *Comedy* and *Leaves*, to repeat, is to deliver an inspiring gospel. "Abandon all hope" is the famous motto for *Inferno*, but *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* are all about hope. In the very last canto Bernard praises Mary as "a living spring of hope" (Pa33:12). "Passage" also raises the spectre

of "teeming spiritual darkness," but Walt finally banishes it with luminescent visions that nearly match those of Dante:

> O Thou transcendent . . .
> Light of the light, shedding forth universes, thou centre of them,
> Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving,
> Thou moral, spiritual fountain . . . (*LG 1892*, 321)[106]

The emphasis here on enlightenment, moral conscience, and love is all part of the Dante gospel. The fountain image also bears on the pilgrim's often-expressed thirst for divine knowledge: his *summum bonum* is a perfect bonding with God. Walt reveals in "Passage" a similar thirst in an aside: "O pensive soul of me—O thirst unsatisfied—waitest not there? / Waitest not haply for us somewhere there the Comrade perfect?" (*LG 1892*, 321). This aligns with the "fusing" and "bundling" urge we have seen in the *Comedy*. We know from a hint Walt dropped earlier in the 1855 "Song of Myself" that this thirst for divine connection was not merely theological but emotional: "As God comes a loving bedfellow and sleeps by my side all night and close on the peep of the day" (15). In the *Comedy*, the longed-for aim is divine communion, an ultimate "bundling." In "Passage" the "aim attained" is more incarnate: to be "fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found, / The Younger melts in fondness in his arms" (*LG 1892*, 322). A very Whitmanic bundling, in other words.

"Passage" employs other memes that Dante found useful. The notion of the soul's journey as a voyage, for instance: "We too take ship O soul." "Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!" Indeed, the poem's ecstatic finale is "O my brave soul! / O farther farther sail!" The last very line—"O farther, farther, farther sail!"—leaves us exactly where we leave the pilgrim: tantalizingly close to safe harbor but not *quite* there. Dante reminds us many times that his poetic skills are not up to capturing the ineffable; here's the very last one: "How incomplete is speech, how weak, when set / against my thought!" (Pa33:121-22). Walt's ship likewise never makes harbor for the same reason: for the ultimate cliffhanger, Ineffability is no longer a problem but a necessity.

The constant sense of real living authors composing the lines of the *Comedy* and *Leaves*—the *io sol uno* of Dante and Walt's "Me myself" discussed above—is reiterated in "Passage" when he dilates his scope to the entire cosmos:

> But that I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me . . .
> Thou matest Time, smilest content at Death,
> And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space. (*LG 1892*, 322)

Is this courage-teaching smile like the one Beatrice beams forth? Other famous themes running through the *Comedy*, we have seen, are the stars, spiritual ascent, enlightenment, and love. All are reprised in "Passage":

> Greater than stars or suns,
> Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth;
> What love than thine and ours could wider amplify?
> What aspirations, wishes, outvie thine and ours O soul?
> What dreams of the ideal? (*LG 1892*, 322)

Of course, throughout the poem—as with the *Comedy*—the reader is invited to assume the place of the author's soul.[107]

## "Rise O Days from Your Fathomless Deeps"

This 1865 poem from *Drum-Taps* also apostrophizes the soul, but its cosmic drama is more intense, as befits its Civil War provenance (*LG 1892*, 228). Here the speaker's soul is, like Dante's pilgrim, "hungering gymnastic," roaming "through the mighty woods," or, like Dante's Ulysses in *Inferno*, sailing "through storms" and contending with "All the menacing might of the world." Through it all the speaker projects his staunch self-reliance, declaring, "I sped to the certainties suitable to me" and "there with my soul I fed, I fed content, supercilious." It is in the spirit of "haughty" Dante that Walt's only use of "supercilious" makes it sound like a happy proud boast.

"Rise O Days" is also Dantean in spirit because its scope dilates to include democracy: "stride on, Democracy! strike with vengeful stroke! / And do you rise higher than ever yet." (*LG 1892*, 229). Both Dante and Walt hated political corruption and faction, be it in the Florentine or American republic: "Disengage yourself from parties . . . these savage, wolfish parties alarm me," Walt warns in *Democratic Vistas*; "Owning no law but their own will, more and more combative, less and less tolerant of the idea of ensemble and of equal brotherhood" (44). The note of democratic vengeance in "Rise O Days," is especially pertinent to the *Comedy*, since there Dante advocates often for the democratic "bundling" of citizens against the corrupt powers-that-be, like those Florentine political enemies who exiled him. There is a special niche in the Eighth Circle of Hell for simonists (traders in church offices) and barrators (profiteers of church or state). Dante's epic poem also privileges the fully inhabited individual personality;

"Rise O Days" announces the same.[108] The poem's last lines signal not only the end of a Civil War but also the end of all earthly seeking: "Hence I will seek no more the food of the northern solitary wilds, / No more the mountains roam or sail the stormy sea." In other words, he has reached Paradise.

## "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing"

Dante Alighieri spent about half his adult life exiled from his beloved Florence. He came to hate the fellow citizens who drove him out, and some of the most bracing moments in the *Comedy* are bursts of vengeful payback that show a very real man is present behind the façade of the well-mannered, earnest neophyte who is the pilgrim. Exile excluded Dante from normal social, political, and artistic intercourse, surely encouraging him to develop his skills at self-reliance. This short poem figures forth Walt's sense of isolation in the midst of a kind of exile. He had probably seen such a tree during his four-month journalistic sojourn in New Orleans in 1848. But it is a poem in the *Calamus* cluster of 1860, which was composed after what seems to have been a roller-coaster love affair in the late 1850s. His exile was more romantic than political. Still, there is a potent Dante connection. Walt says of the oak, "All alone stood it . . . Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous leaves of dark green" (*LG 1892*, 105). This is a winking allusion to his own *Leaves of Grass*: not only is grass dark green but also the embossed leather binding of the 1855 edition. The poem ends mordantly:

> . . . though the live-oak glistens there in Louisiana solitary
> in a wide flat space,
> Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near,
> I know very well I could not. (*LG 1892*, 106)

In a later *Calamus* poem he explains in an aside why a lonely tree could express such joy: "(I loved a certain person ardently and my love was not return'd,/ Yet out of that I have written these songs.)" (*LG 1892*, 110).[104] Walt's ardent but failed love affair produced the *Calamus* cluster; its emotional well-springs arguably shaped *Leaves of Grass* as a whole.

This *Calamus* poem epitomizes the lonely life of the marginalized outlier, the exile, and perhaps it tells us why we now have the joyous *Leaves* he left us. The parallel of two ardent real-life infatuations—Dante with Beatrice Portinari and Walt with that nameless "person"—is clear: after the marriage of Beatrice to a Florentine banker and her death a few years later, Dante produced the

"joyous leaves" of *Paradiso* that would make her forever famous. Likewise, it is also safe to say that if Dante had never been exiled, we would not now possess the *Comedy*.

## "Darest Thou Now O Soul"

This short post-Civil War poem (*LG 1892*, 338) sums up the intimidating journey of Walt's soul, and it has most all the narrative elements at play in the itinerary of Dante's pilgrim. First, it will require courage and will require company: "Walk out with me toward the unknown region, / Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow." The path is not marked—"No map there"—or even visible—"all is blank before us, / All waits undream'd." The landscape seems to be "inaccessible"—and also weirdly off-kilter: "darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds bounding us." But the poet and his soul take the risky leap of faith into the unknown: "we burst forth, we float, / In Time and Space." The last line also seems to suggest a Dantean paradisal ending: "Equal, equipt at last (O joy! O fruit of all!), them to fulfil O soul." Again, the "peril'd" life ends with good news.

## "One Hour to Madness and Joy"

This poem (*LG 1892*, 91), new in the 1860 *Leaves*, is from one of the two clusters that scandalized critics at the time, *Children of Adam*—the other was *Calamus*. Many of its two dozen lines—notably "O to return to Paradise!"—bring Dante to mind. If one reads it in a Dantean, exilic context, the poem becomes an inspiring declaration of freedom from incarceration and the full experience of free will: "O confine me not!" "I was never made to live inside a fence," Walt told Horace (*WWWC* 2:19). It will resonate for the exile who has been either ostracized or silenced: "To have the gag remov'd from one's mouth!" When the speaker exults—"O the puzzle, the thrice-tied knot, the deep and dark pool, all untied and illumin'd!"—we might think of release from a prison cell, but it may also remind us of the frozen lake Cocytus deep in *Inferno*, which we have noted is a vast venue of penal incarceration.

The sheer visionary energy of the yearning speaker here is worthy of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*: "O to drink the mystic deliria deeper than any other

man! / O savage and tender achings!" And this proud declaration might seem appropriate for a same-sex lover in 1860: "O to be yielded to you whoever you are, and you to be yielded to me in defiance of the world!" But this is the kind of bonding in community that Dante often urges in his *Comedy*. The self-reliant meme of *io sol uno* or "Me myself" reappears here when Walt desires "To have the feeling to-day or any day I am sufficient as I am." The poem's almost delirious climax has the vigorous ascendant thrust of Dante's *Paradiso*—one can see why it so upset *New York Times* back in 1860:

> To escape utterly from others' anchors and holds!
> To drive free! to love free! to dash reckless and dangerous! . . .
> To ascend, to leap to the heavens of the love indicated to me!
> To rise thither with my inebriate soul! . . .
> To feed the remainder of life with one hour of fulness and freedom!
> With one brief hour of madness and joy. (*LG 1892*, 92)

We leave Dante's pilgrim at the end of *Paradiso* feeling exactly such elation.

## "Song of the Open Road"

The readers of the *Comedy* and *Leaves* have no choice: they must become tourists, hikers, vagabonds. Dante's work is all about spiritual ambulation from point A, Hell, to point B, Paradise. Walt's reader is often urged to go out-of-doors and get a move on—"no dallier I." Look for what's "under your boot-soles." This is why it is no surprise that "Song of the Open Road" (*LG 1892*, 120-129), which first appeared in the 1856 edition, is a poem filled with themes and memes familiar from Dante. The pilgrim's *diritta via* and Walt's open road are the same thoroughfare. "Allons!" (French for "let's go!") Walt exhorts several times in the poem. "Allons! whoever you are come travel with me!" *All* authors in effect say this to their reader, but such an eager invite is especially apropos for Dante and Walt, who know their reader will not regret this journey.

This open road will reveal "good fortune" and its sights will seem "alive, every part in its best light." The terrain will not prove easy, but this jaunt will be worth the exertion: "Be not discouraged, keep on, there are divine things well envelop'd." Dante's pilgrim gets the same advice, especially from Beatrice. Walt also promises that *visionary* insight will be gained on this road: "I believe that much unseen is also here," Walt tantalizes, and he adds that this road will be "Latent with unseen existences." It will also open up terrain the sight of which

will "do miracles." This sounds much like the *segrete cose* ("hidden things") that Dante's pilgrim hopes Virgil will reveal to him on their own open road (In3:21).

"O public road . . . I love you," Walt exults. Having no tolls, the open road is for Walt a symbol of artistic freedom. "I think heroic deeds were all conceiv'd in the open air, and all free poems also"—the opposite of exile or incarceration—"Out of the dark confinement!" This all enhances the splendid irony of a great poem about freedom, like the *Comedy,* having been composed by an author hoppled in exile; it made his advocacy for free will and political liberty all the more compelling. Especially poignant is what Virgil says of his student at the beginning of *Purgatorio*: "he goes in search of liberty—so precious, / as he who gives his life for it must know" (Pu1:71-72).

Also, do not expect to get rich on this open road; certainly, Walt never did. In a charming 1872 poem, "My Legacy" (*LG 1892*, 376), Whitman admits his poetizing has not exactly proved to be gainful employment: he is no "acquirer vast" and no deviser of "house, nor lands—nor tokens of gold or gems for my friends." His only gift is "just all my songs," his "Souvenirs of Democracy."[110] No, the reader on Walt's open road will have to agree to be bound, like Dante's Christian pilgrim, to the rule of *charity*: "You shall not heap up what is call'd riches, / You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve." We remember from Boccaccio that Dante rejected his notary father's profession and "did not pass on to lucrative studies" (*Life*, 7).

The open road is also a constant goad to curiosity: one must look down *every* road that "stretches and waits for you." Here is a clear invitation to personal growth: the open road is where one can "see the secret of the making of the best person"; this is where "a great personal deed has room." The open road is just another phrase for freedom of self-definition: "Here is realization, / Here is a man tallied—he realizes here what he has in him, / The past, the future, majesty, love."[111] There are also splendid reiterations of the *io sol uno*/"real Me" theme in the poem, which emphasizes the disparity between the genuine inner person and that spurious one we must all create for public display. "Only the kernel of every object nourishes," Walt asserts, and then he asks, "Where is he who tears off the husks for you and me?" One finds such husk-removing persons out in the world and on the open road—and among the *dramatis personae* of the *Comedy*, for instance, St. Peter, St. Thomas, and St. Bernard.[112]

As the poem nears its end, Walt urges his reader to "take your lovers on the road with you." In the next line is an ebullition of cosmic benevolence that almost matches the end of *Paradiso*: "To know the universe itself as a road, as many road, as roads for traveling souls. / All parts away for the progress of

souls." The last section of "Open Road" begins: "Allons! the road is before us!" That might be more apt for the "wand'ring steps" of Adam and Eve at the end of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but then come these closing lines, which return us to Dante and the "bundling" power of love: "Camerado, I give you my hand! / I give you my love more precious than money . . . Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?"

## "To Him That Was Crucified"

The Dantean ethos of this poem (*LG 1892*, 298), new in the 1860 *Leaves*, is obvious: Christ is a major unifying element of both *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*—of course, he is entirely absent from *Inferno*. We have already discussed Christ's appearance in "Chanting the Square Deific," which appeared in 1865. But what a difference five years and a Civil War made! The interaction here is more man-to-man, so to speak, while in "Chanting" the thrust is more impersonal, abstractly theological. Nor is it a surprise that a poem that appeared in the same volume as the *Calamus* cluster is more homosocially oriented, beginning simply "My spirit to yours dear brother." There is an element of Virgil's and Dante's elaborate "bromance" in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* in Walt's elaborate fraternal bonding here. Likewise in the ebullient style of the first *Leaves* editions is "I specify you with joy O my comrade to salute you"—almost like a hearty greeting on "million-footed" Broadway. The emphatically human relationship of Dante's pilgrim with Christ, moderated so skillfully by Virgil and Beatrice, is mimicked by the democracy existing between Christ's spirit and Walt's: "we all labor together transmitting the same charge." "We few equals," he calls the two of them.

"To Him" also reflects a decided Dantean urge toward human community, which Walt revealed early in his career: "I will make poems, songs, thoughts, with reference to ensemble" (*LG 1892*, 25). The desire for the "rapport of men" also animates Dante's *Comedy*. Walt and Christ align with the "compassionaters." The hatchers of disharmony, conflict and faction are their enemy:

> We hear the bawling and din, we are reach'd at by divisions,
> jealousies, recriminations on every side,
> They close peremptorily upon us to surround us from every side,
> my comrade . . .

The poem's climax—two long lines—contain all the Dantean hallmarks: cosmic

reach beyond place and time, the exercise of freedom and free will, eyes on the future, and that ultimate bonding agent, love:

> Yet we walk unheld, free, the whole earth over, journeying up and down till we make our ineffaceable mark upon time and the diverse eras,
> Till we saturate time and eras, that the men and women of races, ages to come, may prove brethren and lovers as we are.

## "Beginners" and "Poets to Come"

These two 1860 poems, which Whitman eventually placed in his introductory *Inscriptions* cluster, give us his thoughts on his own place in the grand sweep of poetic history. Both are preoccupied with a poet's legacy, which is something Boccaccio said was much on Dante's mind too: "his admirable aspiration for perpetual glory made him scorn ephemeral wealth" (*Life*, 9). "Beginners" (*LG 1892*, 15) asserts that truly pioneering poets bring *perplexing change*: "How dear and dreadful they are to the earth." The voice of the exiled outlier can unsettle, especially when it is "orotund sweeping and final" (*LG 1892*, 68): "what a paradox appears their age . . . How people respond to them, yet know them not." Who *is* this strange person?—a question many early *Leaves* reviewers asked. Remember, the first glimmer of Dante's future fame, Boccaccio's *Life*, was written *thirty* years after the poet died. Whitman observes that "all times mischoose the objects of their adulation," and his fate turned out to be almost the same as Dante's: it was about thirty years after his death that Whitman's position as America's first great poet began to be acknowledged.[113] The poem closes, however, by asserting about great poets who bring the new: "there is something relentless in their fate." The poem's last line tells us great beginners pay an "inexorable price" for such pioneering, yet the initial contumely is finally worth it: their final victory—defeating oblivion—is indeed a "great purchase."

Dante thought much about his place in the history of poetry, even summoning Virgil, a great beginner himself, as his idol/model. But Dante's pilgrim always refers to Virgil as a poet, not as a mentor or guide. A. N. Wilson points to the element of *amour propre* that parades in the *Comedy*: its "very simple theme," he writes, is Dante's "desire to become the best Italian poet, the poet of Italy who deserves to be placed alongside the great poets of antiquity."[114] But Dante's view of poetry was also prospective; he also thought about his future legacy. That is why he arranges to include Ser Brunetto's rosy prophecy

of future fame in *Inferno* (see In15:50-54). The weight of Dante's consciousness of his legacy is earnestly revealed as he addresses the Eternal Light on *Paradiso*'s last page: "make my tongue so powerful that I / may leave to people of the future one / gleam of glory that is Yours" (Pa33:70-72). Walt's eye is also often cast to the future, as in "Poets to Come" (*LG 1892*, 18), though the most memorable prospective glance may be in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry": "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence" (*LG 1892*, 130).[115] "Poets to Come" betrays a Dantean *amour propre* too; it seems to call for succeeding poets in his spitting image: "a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known, / Arouse! for you must justify me." He is obviously hoping for *Leaves 2.0* or *3.0*. He says he has only contributed "one or two indicative words for the future," but that is a hilariously low-ball estimate. The concluding verse paragraph seems suspiciously casual: "I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face." But then, like Dante, Walt puts the intellectual onus on the reader's own intellect and moral conscientiousness: "Leaving it to you to prove and define it, / Expecting the main things from you." Whitman's death would finally make future poets and their readers responsible for the "main things."

## "To the Sun-Set Breeze"

Ezra Pound, like T. S. Eliot, was a career-long devoté of Dante. Although he gave Whitman a pretty hard time—"He is disgusting . . . an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission"—he also acknowledged Walt as "my spiritual father." And we have noted his impressive remark that "Whitman is to my Fatherland . . . what Dante is to Italy." Pound happened to single out one poem for praise: "And yet if a man has written lines like Whitman's to the *Sunset Breeze* one has to love him."[116] This somewhat startling praise—there is so much splendid else to choose from!—is highly apropos here because "To the Sun-Set Breeze" (*LG 1892*, 414) is a thoroughly Dantean performance. It begins firmly situated in the mundane real world and then, in sixteen lines, dilates to hallucinatingly cosmic and philosophical scope. The scene opens near dusk in Whitman's Mickle Street home. An old man, "weak-down, melted-worn with sweat," apostrophizes a gentle "cool-freshing" breeze following a "heated day." In a few lines the poem achieves Dantean lift-off. The breeze becomes a "messenger-magical" that now brings "occult medicines." It also brings cosmic

expansion: "somehow I feel the globe itself swift-swimming in space." In another Dantean touch the breeze seems sourced in love: "blown from lips so loved, now gone." It is "God-sent," a manifestation of His grace that touches his *body*: "For thou art spiritual, Godly, most of all known to my sense." A whiff of *Paradiso*? Finally, the breeze becomes a "Minister to speak to me" and expresses, as Dante often did, the ineffable: "what word never told and cannot tell." The closing lines addressed to the breeze perfectly capture the double-helix of the real and the numinous that animates the *Comedy*: "Art thou not universal concrete's distillation? Law's, all Astronomy's last refinement?" The poem's last line poses two questions that the entire *Comedy* was intended to answer: "Hast thou no soul? Can I not know, identify thee?" *Leaves of Grass*, of course, is also intended to answer these questions.

## *Parting Glances*

Some ebullitions of Dante's spirit in Walt's work arise, not only in entire poems, but more fleetingly, serendipitously, resonantly. By way of an *envoi*, here are some instances of what I perceive to be the double-helix relationship of Dante and Walt:

*Hope vs. Doubt.* Hope is the driving force of the *Comedy* and *Leaves*. But doubt dogs every step of Dante's pilgrim and, as it often did for Walt and his own soul. Perfect, therefore, is this image for a main obstacle—doubt—to the latter's soul-searching:

> One doubt nauseous undulating like a snake, crawl'd
> on the ground before me,
> Continually preceding my steps, turning upon me oft,
> ironically hissing low.
> ("Rise O Soul from Your Fathomless Depths" *LG 1892*, 230)

The metaphor stands for all the terrifying experiences the pilgrim confronts in Dante's fearsome but, in the end, exhilarating wonderland.

*Cosmonauts.* The *Children of Adam* poem, "We Two, How Long We Were Fool'd" (*LG 1892*, 93), is a quintessential Whitman poem of "bundling" and bonding. When he says, "We are two resplendent suns, we it is who balance ourselves orbic and stellar," we immediately think of the resplendent cosmic

enlightenment of the end of *Paradiso*. The "stellar" underlines the Dantean touch. The blinding view filling the pilgrim's eye seems to be repeated near the end of the very last *Leaves* poem: "An unknown sphere more real than I dream'd, more direct, darts awakening rays about me, *So long!*" (*LG 1892*, 382). The same visionary climax figures in "Song of the Universal" (*LG 1892*, 181): "All, all for immortality, / Love like the light silently wrapping all, / Nature's amelioration blessing all." Yet another *Paradiso* moment comes at the end of "The Mystic Trumpeter"—the emphasis on *freedom* and *love* is also Dantean:

> Joy! joy! in freedom, worship, love! joy the ecstasy of life!
> Enough to merely be! enough to breathe!
> Joy! joy! all over joy! (*LG 1892*, 358)[117]

*Simplicity and complexity.* Walt enthuses in his 1855 preface about simplicity: "The glory of expression and the sunshine of the light of letters is simplicity. Nothing is better than simplicity" (vi). T. S. Eliot, in his essay on the *Comedy*, marvels likewise at "the simplicity of Dante"; his "allegorical method makes for simplicity and intelligibility,"[118] *but* there is, of course, a contradictory complexity in both masterworks. Walt also opines in the 1855 preface, "The indirect is always as great and real as the direct" (x). The interpenetration of the real/natural/autobiographical world with the veiled/spiritualized/visionary world often challenges the reader of the *Comedy* and *Leaves*. In other words, the quotidian "me" world as opposed to the personal "real Me" world. Thinking about these two worlds simultaneously is a constant challenge in reading both the *Comedy* and *Leaves of Grass*.

*Of the Soul and Saints.* In the spring of 1888, Walt conversationally offered this very Dantean credo to Horace Traubel: "I believe in the eligibility of the human soul for all perfect things" (*WWWC* 1:107). A few moments later he added, "I believe in saints if they're far enough off." One naturally wonders whether the several saints who figure significantly in the *Comedy*—James (the early apostle, d. 44 CE), Peter (the first pope, d. 64 CE), Peter Damian (c.1007-1072), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), and Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274)—would have struck Walt as far enough off to believe in the lessons they teach Dante's pilgrim.

*Of Florence and Manhattan the sons.* Both poets, early in life, loved the cities they are now identified with.[119] In *Paradiso*, Dante has his ancestor foretell his exile from Florence: "You shall leave everything you love most dearly"

(Pa17:55). This glorious Florence of the *Comedy*, however, existed in the past or in the future, but not in the wretchedly corrupt present. Past Florence—"sober and chaste lived in tranquillity"—is idealized by Dante (Pa15:99). The last canticle, of course, promises a civic resurrection: a citizenry "just and sane" (*popol giusto e sano*—Pa3:39) that will again thrive in a future Florence. In contrast, Walt's euphoric displays of civic pride are many and vivid and mostly convey a *present* joy. This is the exhilarated poet of "O superb! O Manhattan, my own, my peerless!" (*LG 1892*, 219) or "Manhattan crowds, with their turbulent musical chorus! / Manhattan faces and eyes forever for me" (*LG 1892*, 245). Of course, as his existence unfolded for two decades in Camden, New Jersey, Walt's feelings about Manhattan became, as with Dante, more romantic, idealized, improved by nostalgia.

*Love and the Stars.* Love and the stars are joined, we have seen, in the final ecstatic lines of the *Comedy*. The same connection is memorably made in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (*LG 1892*, 196), in which Whitman explained the origin of his vocation as an "outsetting bard."[120] The heart of the poem is a visionary, almost hallucinated experience of the boy Walt listening to a lovelorn he-bird singing an elaborate "aria" mourning the loss of his she-bird. Over the moonlit Long Island scene the stars preside—"the stars glistened"—as the bird pours out his heart: "*O rising stars! / Perhaps the one I want so much will rise, will rise with some of you*." The aria's climax pours out a flood grief:

> *Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!*
> *But my mate no more, no more with me!*
> *We two together no more.*

But at the end the stars remain: "The aria sinking, / All else continuing, the stars shining." The boy Walt is left "ecstatic . . . with his hair the atmosphere dallying, / The love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at last tumultuously bursting."[121] In the last tercet of *Paradiso*, also memorably presided over by the stars, the pilgrim Dante feels a similar ecstasy.

*Botanical.* As the pilgrim begins his ascent to heaven in *Purgatorio*, Virgil embraces him ("he girt me"—*mi cinse*) and hands him a bon voyage gift—a *umile pianta*—for the journey:

> O wonder! Where he plucked the humble plant
> that he had chosen, there that plant sprang up

again, identical, immediately. (Pu1:135-36)

The Whitmanic "bundling" and the magical gift of "hopeful green stuff" are apparent signs that Mount Purgatory will be a venue for the miracle of spiritual renewal. But what to make of the "humble plant"? No plant is more humble or universal than the grass, but this would not fit Dante's image or be suitable for gifting. *Pianta*, in Italian, has an aquatic connotation, and Mandelbaum's note for this phrase refers to it as a "reed." It would be pleasant to think that Dante had *acorus calamus* or *calamus aromaticus* in mind, for Walt chose this humble, ordinary plant and put it to eloquent use in his splendid *Calamus* cluster, where it symbolizes the supreme Dantean ideal, love.[122]

*Two Resplendent Suns.* Sir Philip Sidney (1556-1586) wrote in his *Arcadia*: "When two sunnes do appear / Some say it doth betoken wonders near."[123] How true that is of our two poets. Two over-arching achievements of Dante's *Comedy* and Walt's *Leaves of Grass* remain to be reiterated and celebrated. First, these two resplendent suns created masterworks that were totally new under the sun. Each used his native language as a weapon to challenge his cultural and political world and to fully inhabit his "real Me." In his 1855 preface, Walt called his tongue a "powerful language of resistance" (xii). Auerbach states that, with his almost instant perfection of the *terza rima* form and his rhyme-rich Italian, "Dante created his own tradition." Walt, liberated from rhyme, meter, and form, did the same in his first *Leaves* and subsequent editions. Both works have proved utterly unrepeatable. Second, the *Comedy* and *Leaves* are multitudinously *coherent* works. All their constituents make an extraordinary whole—one, in Walt's words, "of compact all-diffused truth" (*LG 1892*, 361). Auerbach notes that "wherever you may open the *Comedy*, you have the whole of it," and that insight applies to *Leaves* as well.[124] Each of these creations mimes a real personal life in phantasmagoric, visionary poetic form. For Dante and Walt their own life became their lifework.

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## Notes

All quotations from the *Comedy* will be taken from Allen Mandelbaum's translation, *The Divine Comedy* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1995). The three canticles will be abbreviated: *Inferno*, In-; *Purgatorio*, Pu-; *Paradiso*, Pa-. Occasionally I use Robert Pinsky's *The Inferno of Dante* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994) when his translation is more apt for my purposes (these instances

are always noted). Because "divine" was added to the epic poem's title after Dante's death (thanks to his first biographer Giovanni Boccaccio), I will refer to it in my text as the *Comedy*. Since my purpose here is to make camerados of these two poets separated by more than five centuries, I will feel free to refer to them on equal footing by using their nicknames (Alighieri was baptized Durante, as Whitman was baptized Walter, so Dante and Walt are both nicknames). With Dante, in any case, his given name has become a surname. Quotations for Whitman's work are from the original editions, as indicated, and from Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), abbreviated *CRE*.

1 Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 6 vols., ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 5:1863 (hereafter *NUPM*). That assessment contains a choice irony, for in his fiery defense of Whitman in his 1866 pamphlet "The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication," William O'Connor defended Whitman from the charge of authoring scandalous passages by citing several raunchy ones from Dante, summing up sarcastically: "Dante, too, has 'indecent passages.' Out with Dante!"

2 William Roscoe Taylor, "Personal Reflections of Walt Whitman," *Scribner's Magazine*, June 1919 (online at *whitmanarchive.org)*. Joseph Chesley Mathews, "Walt Whitman's Reading of Dante," *University of Texas Studies in English* 19 (1939), 172-179.

3 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols. (various publishers, 1906-1996), 1:105 (hereafter *WWWC*). Somewhat in this vein was the conclusion in Glauco Cambon's essay—"Dante's Presence in American Literature" in *Dante Studies* 118 (2000)—that Whitman and Emily Dickinson "were unaffected in their creative practice by whatever knowledge they had of Dante"—quoted by Joshua Matthews in "Walt Whitman's Vision of the Inferno, or Dante's *Drum-Taps*," *WWQR* 32 (2014), 63.

4 *WWWC* 6:409. Later Walt offered to loan the book to Horace, and, hinting at the poet's diffidence about reading other poets, notes that the middle folds of the book had not been cut; he also quotes Walt as saying, "The best part of the book is the part that is not about Dante" (*WWWC* 7:398).

Since Symonds (1840-1893) will figure often below, it is worth noting that he initiated a long correspondence with Whitman in 1868 over possible suppression of poems in the first London Whitman edition. In 1872, Symonds began to "catechize" Walt about the homosexual agenda of the *Calamus* cluster—the letter is printed at *WWWC* 1:74-76). Though Whitman spent nearly twenty years evading a candid, honest response, he came to respect and honor Symonds: "loyal, unqualifying—never seems ashamed—never draws back . . . Symonds has got into our crowd in spite of his culture" (*WWWC* 1:388). Later Walt summed up, "For pure grace and suavity of phrase, for a certain element of literary as distinguished from oratorical eloquence, he is unexcelled. Symonds . . . is a craftsman of the first water—pure as crystal—fine, fine fine" (*WWWC* 2:277). "Anyway, I love Symonds. Who could fail to love a man who could write such a letter?" (*WWWC* 1:204). Symonds's devotion to both Dante and Walt constitutes another reason to write this essay.

5 *WWWC* 2:24. Be it noted that Whitman adds, "They are not my ideals but they are ideals—very lofty ideals."

6 "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads," *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay,

1892), 423 (hereafter *LG 1892*). Of course, one thinks here of the *selva oscura* mentioned in the *Comedy*'s first tercet.

7 *Religio Medici* (Part I, sec. 6), ed. James Winny (Oxford University Press, 1963), 8. I used this quotation in my *Containing Multitudes: Walt Whitman and the British Literary Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 167. In that study, too, I paired Whitman with several great poets from "far-back days": Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, Blake, and Wordsworth. Speaking of precursor-doubles, perhaps reference to an even more "far-back" author is pertinent here: the nameless poet, English and Christian, who created *Beowulf* sometime in the 8th to 11th century. Seamus Heaney, in the introduction to his fine translation (Norton; bilingual ed. Farrar, Straus, 2000-1), describes the 3,200-line epic poem as "a work of the greatest imaginative vitality, a masterpiece . . . Its narrative elements may belong to a previous age but as a work of art it lives in its own continuous present, equal to our knowledge of reality in the present time." Dante's *Comedy* fits Heaney's definition of a masterpiece, and one trusts *Leaves of Grass* will, in the fullness of time, be similarly praised.

Ezra Pound wrote in 1909, "I should like to drive Whitman into the old world . . . and to scourge America with all the old beauty" ("What I feel about Walt Whitman," *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson [New Directions, 1973], 146); this is what the following pages will attempt to do.

8 Joshua Matthews, "Walt Whitman's Vision of the Inferno, or Dante's *Drum-Taps*," *WWQR* 32 (2014), see note 5 on 63.

9 A. N. Wilson, *Dante in Love* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011), 261. Ralph Waldo Emerson also recorded in his journal that Dante "communicates all his secrets, and endless autobiography, and never lets on he means himself" (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notes*, ed. Susan Sutton Smith *et al.* [Harvard University Press, 1966], 14:286-87). Wilson's splendid study is by one who takes pains to state he does not number himself among the scholarly *dantisti*. James Russell Lowell, a major nineteenth-century Dantist who translated the *Comedy*, declared that all Dante's works were "autobiographic" and also that "everything he wrote is but an explanatory comment on his own character and opinions" ("Dante," in *Among My Books* [Houghton Mifflin, 1894] 26, 43). Lowell also emphasizes the way Dante's works constitute a *poet*'s autobiography, saying they tell "a history of the growth of the poet's mind" (45)—then compares them to Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. Emerson also admired the way Dante insinuated his real self into his work; he says of the *Comedy* in his essay "The Poet": "Dante's praise is that he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher" ("The Poet," in *Essays and Poems* [Library of America, 1983], 465). Emerson also admired how "Dante knew how to throw the weight of his body into each act . . . I find him full of *nobil volgare eloquenza* . . . and can be rowdy if he please, and he does please" (*Journals*, 11:133-34). See Kathleen Verduin, "Emerson, Dante, and American Nationalism," in Aida Audeh ed., *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century* [Oxford University Press, 2012], 266-83). Emerson, by the way, was a driving force behind the publication of the 1849 John Carlyle translation of Dante, which Whitman read.

10 *WWWC* 4:184. A similar point is made in a Whitman manuscript jotting: "A man only is interested in any thing when he identifies himself with it"—*NUPM* 1:57.

11 Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Life of Dante*, tr. Vincenzo Bollettino (Garland, 1990), 20. Hereafter cited in the text as *Life*.

12 Preface, 1855 *Leaves* (viii). It will also remind us of the presidential helmsman the poet famously memorialized in "O Captain! My Captain!"

13 The poem was later titled "To The States," and Whitman tellingly placed it among the credo poems in the introductory *Inscriptions* cluster. (One hastens to note it was written *before* the southern states joined the Secession.) That his outlier's status lasted until well after Whitman's death is suggested by H. L. Mencken's observation in the year of his centennial on the poet's "intellectual foreignness and loneliness" in America (*Smart Set*, October, 1919, in *Smart Set Criticism*, ed. William Nolte [1987], 184). Mencken added: "His countrymen regarded him generally as a loafer and a scoundrel" and he was only saved by "foreign enthusiasts." A. N. Wilson believes Dante's outlier's instincts were encouraged by two of his most important philosophical influences: "Aristotle thought it was legitimate to question everything and so did his greatest medieval exponent, St. Thomas Aquinas" (*Dante in Love*, 165).

14 This sounds much like Dante furiously sending committers of simony and barratry to the Eighth Circle of Hell, containing all the fraudsters.

15 Whitman makes a very similar statement about extreme inequality in America: "what is more terrible, more alarming" than the total lack of rapport between "the comparatively few successful rich, and the great masses of the unsuccessful, the poor . . . As a mixed political and social question is not this full of dark significance?" ("Lacks and Wants Yet," in *Notes Left Over*, *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), 334 (hereafter *CPW*).

16 He expressed the outlier's lament a year before: "I have not gain'd the acceptance of my own time'—"A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads" (*LG 1892*, 423).

17 Whitman had a word for his party-of-one view—Personalism—which he defined in *Democratic Vistas*: "Only here . . . the meditation, the devout ecstasy, the soaring flight. Only here, communion with the mysteries, the eternal problems" (43). This, as we will see, is one of many intimations of Dante's climactic canticle, *Paradiso*.

18 This spiritualized light reminds one of the Inner Light of the Quakers, whose influence (through his mother) Whitman often boasted of. He told Traubel, "A curious affinity exists right there between me and the Quakers, who always say this is so or so because of some inner justifying fact—because it could not be otherwise" (*WWWC* 2:143). This was the perfect mindset for creating an outlier, or party-of-one and a despiser of all factions. As all superb outliers must do, Whitman quickly developed a thick skin; he reminisced to Traubel about his early career, "I was everywhere, practically everywhere, disavowed—hated, ridiculed, lampooned, parodied; rejected by notables everywhere . . . I was more used to being kicked out than asked in" (*WWWC* 1:325-326).

19 *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (Berlin,1929; English translation Ralph Manheim [New York: New York Review, 2007], 86—hereafter cited *Dante*). This was Auerbach's first publication, preceding the more famous *Mimesis* of 1946 (Eng. tr. 1953), which has a chapter on Dante. Edward Said, in his introduction for a 2003 edition of *Mimesis*, calls this chapter—on a passage in Canto 10 of *Inferno*—"one of the great moments in modern critical literature" (xxiv). Said also writes of Auerbach's "searingly and strangely intimate characterization of the Christian Thomist poet Dante who emerges from the pages of *Mimesis* as the seminal figure in Western literature" (xvii). Said em-

phasizes that, like the *Comedy*, *Mimesis* was "an exile's book"—written by a German Jew exiled to a teaching post in Istanbul and "cut off from his roots and his native environment" (xvii). The notable late nineteenth-century Dantist James Russell Lowell wrote that Dante "marks the era at which the modern begins" and indeed is "the founder of modern literature" ("Dante," in *Among My Books* [Houghton Mifflin, 1894], 94). A similar assertion was made by Engels in his 1893 preface to the Italian edition of *The Communist Manifesto*: "The close of the feudal Middle Ages, and the opening of the modern capitalist era, are marked by a colossal figure: an Italian, Dante, both the last poet of the Middle Ages and the first poet of modern times" (see Stefano Jossa, "Politics vs. Literature: The Myth of Dante and the Italian National Identity," in Aida Audeh, ed., *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century* [2012], 32).

20 Dante deploys several words for this: *alma, anima, spirto, ombra*. For Whitman, the soul is ubiquitous in *Leaves*, appearing nearly 270 times, most famously in his boast to "loafe and invite my soul" (*LG 1892*, 29) and "Clear and sweet is my soul" (*LG 1892*, 31). In his farewell poem, Whitman declares, "I have sung the body and the soul," and then he sums up, "I announce the great individual, fluid as Nature, chaste, affectionate, compassionate, fully arm'd" ("*So Long!*" *LG 1892*, 381). See Whitman's notably soul-full poem "Think of the Soul," discussed below in note 63.

21 Preface to *Divine Comedy: The Inferno* (1849), xxv, xxiii. John Carlyle was the brother of Thomas Carlyle, an important literary figure for Whitman. Auerbach identifies the reason Dante chose to poetize in the "noble vernacular" of "everyday usage": "he writes in Italian because he does not wish to serve learned Italians or foreigners who know Latin, but the unlearned in Italy who are capable of noble aspirations" (*Dante*, 76-77). Joan Ferrante, in her study of the poet's politics, also thinks the *Comedy* is in Italian "Because Dante believes in language as a unifying force within a nation" and because the *Comedy* "can reach a wider audience in his native land and because he has greater freedom in his use of it" (*The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy* [Princeton University Press, 1984], 242, 367).

22 "Dante," *Selected Essays 1927-1932* (Harcourt, Brace, 1932), 230, 234. Though Eliot, like myself, did not count himself among scholarly Dantists, he counted Dante "the most persistent and deepest influence upon my own verse" ("What Dante Means to Me," in *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* [Farrar, Straus, 1965], 125). Another celebrator of Dante's simplicity, perhaps surprisingly, was Theodore Roosevelt, who published in 1913 a lavish salute to the poet, "Dante and the Bowery," praising "the mighty Florentine's high simplicity of soul" (*History as Literature and Other Essays* [Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913], 229).

23 "Divine Poem," *The New Republic*, (November 29, 1980), 29-34. Merrill also admired the "great concision" of the poet's "eclectic middle style." Lowell's remark is in his long essay "Dante" in *Among My Books* (1894), 123.

24 Whitman's friend Moncure Conway pertinently said, "The plainness of speech in *Leaves of Grass* is indeed biblical" *(Fortnightly Review*, [October 15, 1866]—online, *whitmanarchive.org*).

25 *NUPM* 1:60, 65. Perhaps this is another hint why Dante chose to write in his native Italian. That Dante affected like Walt the *genus humile* and a blunt coarseness appealed to Emerson. Dante, he said, "knows 'God damn,' & can be rowdy if he please, & he does please" (*Journals*, 11:134).

26 "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads" (*LG 1892*, 438). Whitman might have added Dante's canticles to his list. Dante and Walt were bound by a shared devotion to the language of the *demos*. This was strikingly suggested by that "Western boy" Ezra Pound, born in the Idaho territory, when he wrote that Whitman was "to my fatherland . . . what Dante is to Italy" (*Selected Prose 1909-1965,* ed. William Cookson [New York: New Directions, 1973], 116). The same point was made in an amazing, unlooked-for essay titled "Dante and the Bowery" by another spiritual Western boy, Theodore Roosevelt: "Of all the poets of the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman was the only one who dared use the Bowery—that is, use anything that was striking and vividly typical of humanity around him—as Dante used the ordinary humanity of his day" (*History as Literature and Other Essays*, 220). The Bowery, vividly described by Whitman in his newspaper-writing days, Roosevelt also tied to Dante: "The Bowery is one of the great highways of humanity, a highway of seething life, of varied interests, of fun, of work, of sordid and terrible tragedy; it is haunted by demons as evil as any that stalk the *Inferno*" (220).

27 "By Blue Ontario's Shore" (*LG 1892*, 264). The first title of the poem had a more democratic and Dantean style: "Poem of Many in One."

28 Horace Traubel chose this sentence as the masthead motto for the very Whitman-centric monthly Philadelphia journal *The Conservator*, which he founded and edited from 1891 to 1919 (see *Conserving Walt Whitman's Fame*, ed. Gary Schmidgall [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006], xvii-xviii). Similarly, Whitman asserted in his "Backward Glance" summing-up that one "purpose enclosing all" in his career was to establish, "the foundation of moral America" (LG 437).

Morality is also the center of Dante's epic poem. This is emphasized in the most comprehensive and convincing analysis of his political science, Joan Ferrante's *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy*. "The *Comedy*," she asserts at the outset, "is a political tract" (4), and later offers this central thesis: "The moral level of Dante's allegory is also the political level because it is impossible to be a moral being without being a good citizen" (136). Here is Ferrante's summary of her book: Dante offers "a model in broad outlines for the ideal society on earth, first all the traits that must be excluded from it (in Hell), then the remedies to counter them (in Purgatory), and finally its essential elements and functions (in Paradise). A political society should be unified under one rule, with every individual contributing to the common good according to his or her abilities, motivated by love and justice so that all can realize most fully the potential in each" (309). The Whitmanic memes here are obvious: (1) *Inferno* becomes the equivalent of *Democratic Vistas*, which describes the infernal horrors of post-Civil War society in These States; (2) Walt's advocacy for the Union mimics Dante's relentless attack on the self-interested city-states—Florence chief among them—that obstructed a unified Italy; (3) the kelson of love, which must bind all citizens together; and (4) the notion that the government will release the maximum of individual self-expression. When Ferrante declares that in Dante one "cannot separate personal morality from the public context" (199), she is also stating a Whitmanic principle. See, for example, the lecture of the wise courtier Marco Lombardo to the pilgrim on the importance of personal morality in society (Pu16:44ff), which Dante placed at the center of his *Comedy*.

One of the late-nineteenth-century's most important American Dantists, Charles Eliot Norton, explained his recent popularity was by noting "the materialism of our existing state of civilization, against which the study of the poet is a partial reaction." Norton also praised Dante for showing how poetry can aid in "the perfecting and invigorating of [man's] moral nature." He also calls Dante "the poet of man as a moral and responsible being" and praises him as a poet who "discloses [readers] to themselves and reveals to them their own ideals . . . He becomes the interpreter of his age to itself" (quoted in Christian Y. Dupont, "Charles Eliot Norton and the Rationale for American

Dante Studies," in Aida Audeh ed., *Dante and the Long Nineteenth Century* [Oxford University Press, 2012], 251). This is a perfect description of the *raison d'etre* of *Democratic Vistas*.

29 Dante's popularity in the nineteenth century as a political revolutionary and unifier of a nation was in fact ratified in the Marx-Engels *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848: in his preface to the 1893 Italian edition of the *Manifesto* Engels declared, "Today, as in 1300, a new historical era is approaching. Will Italy give us the new Dante, who will mark the hour of this new, proletarian era?" (see Stefano Jossa, "Politics vs. Myth: The Myth of Dante and the Italian National Identity," in Aida Audeh, ed., *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2012], 32). Emerson opined that a major cultural event of the nineteenth century was "the new importance of the genius of Dante . . . to America" (*Journals*, 11:382).

30 "Nationality—(And Yet.)" from *Notes Left Over* (*CPW*, 317). All quotations here are from this short essay, which first appeared in 1882. One can perhaps generalize that the personal story dominated in Whitman's early work, the national-political one in his later writing. Whitman insists that the "thoroughly fused, relentless, dominating Union" is finally "a moral and spiritual idea." His positioning of These States as "carrying out the republican principle" (as opposed to the Old World's "empires and feudalities") just might elicit a nod to Dante, who was a stout partisan for the Florentine *repubblica* (1115-1569—*res pubblica* = thing of the people) and despised hegemonic powers, like Holy Roman emperors or Popes. Though, as between those two, Dante would have preferred a Holy Roman Emperor to a Pope. A pope was responsible for the final demise of the Florentine Republic. National unity was a pillar of Dante's thought; as James Russell Lowell wrote, "Unity was Dante's leading doctrine" (*Among My Books*, 108).

31 As Whitman admits later in the essay about the tensions between the personal and the political, "The problem is, to harmoniously adjust the two, and the play of the two." In "American democracy, *both* ideas must be fu[l]fill'd" (*CPW*, 319) Shortly after the end of the "Four Years' War" he reiterated his hope that *Leaves* would stand as a "thread-voice" for political community: "an aggregated, inseparable, unprecedented, vast, composite, electric *democratic nationality*" (preface, *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free*, *CPW*, 280).

This emphasis on nationality is thoroughly Dantesque. The great Risorgimento patriot Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872)—there is a bust of him in New York's Central Park—wrote in 1844, "it must be said and insisted upon that this idea of national greatness is the leading thought in all that Dante did or wrote"; Mazzini later wrote that "an existence of fifty-six years was for [Dante] but a single sigh, and this was for Italy" (see Stefano Jossa, "Politics vs. Literature: The Myth of Dante and the Italian National Identity," in Aida Audeh, ed., *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century* [2012], quoted on 38, 37).

32 A white lily was the symbol of Florence; a flag "reversed" or turned upside down was a sign of contempt or humiliation. Here is another example of Dante's infuriation over his exile.

33 Introduction, Mandelbaum tr., *The Divine Comedy* (Everyman), 26, 30.

34 *Dante in Love*, 232. See the spree of images of bundling-as-bonding in Whitman's *Children of Adam* poem "We Two, How Long We Were Fool'd" (*LG 1892*, 93). The reader is deeply insinuated in the Virgil-pilgrim bundle (*fascio*), as Wilson summarizes: "If Dante's *Comedy* works—if it takes you over, which it is trying to do—then, in the end you become the pilgrim; your fears and terrors

find you isolated in the dark wood; your sins are purged as you climb the mountain; you are led by Beatrice/Grace into the heavenly vision. His journey becomes the human journey" (232).

35 *Dante in Love*, 279.

36 *Dante in Love*, 141, 172, 237, 240.

37 "Self-Reliance," Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 265.

38 Osip Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," *Selected Essays*, tr. Sidney Monas (Austin: University of Texas, 1977), 24-25. Erich Auerbach saw impressive futurism in the *Comedy*, which "reaches out so much further into the past and the future than any individual work of the early *trecento* that no comparison is possible" (*Dante*, 93).

39 Introduction, Mandelbaum tr., *The Divine Comedy*, 28. Auerbach says of Dante's opening lines, "The language is also that of a didactic treatise" and declares that an "almost severely accurate record of events and dogmatic instruction, rational to the point of pedantry—these are the determining factors in the style of the *Comedy*" (*Dante*, 160). The noted late-nineteenth-century educator and Dantist Charles Eliot Norton also recognized the *Comedy*'s pedagogical purpose, calling it "a work of didactic morals of supreme significance" and said his "main intent is didactic"; he also believed that Dante's agenda was "rooted . . . in the cultivation of moral consciousness through poetic stimulation of the imaginative mental faculties . . . and a corresponding effort to free the mind from the grip of materialism" (Christian Dupont, "Charles Eliot Norton and the Rationale for American Dante Studies," in Aida Audeh ed., *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 252, 261). Walt's "master" Emerson also prized Dante as a teacherly poet: "I think if I were professor of Rhetoric,—teacher of the art of writing well, to young men, I should use Dante for my text-book" *(The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966], 11:133-34).

Auerbach believed Dante cast Virgil as the epitome of education: "Dante endowed his Virgil with all the candor of a man who has attained the highest form of human education" ("Dante and Virgil" (1931), in *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. James Porter, [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014], 133). In this essay Auerbach also reveals Virgil's salutary influence on Dante and praises his appearance in the *Comedy*: "though he is technically but a shadow of one who has passed away, he is also a living human being" whose "personality . . . emerges with enormous clarity."

40 Eugenio Montale was getting at this point when he wrote, "Our world no longer experiences visions, but Dante's world is still that of a visionary" (Introduction, Mandelbaum Everyman tr., 27). Auerbach finesses this point differently: "The content of the *Comedy* is a vision, but what is beheld in the vision is the truth as a concrete reality, hence it is both real and rational" (*Dante*, 159). He also makes a related point: "The *Comedy* . . . treats of earthly reality in its true and definite form, but palpable and concrete as this reality is, it takes on an ethereal dreamlike quality in the Other World . . . [Dante] leads *all* men into a realm apart, where the air is not that of our everyday earth" (*Dante*, 172-173). Emerson emphasized the dream-element in Dante thus: "The sonnambulic genius of Dante is dream strengthened to the tenth power,—dream so fierce that it grasps all the details of the phantom spectacle" (*Selected Journals 1841-1877* [New York: Library of America, 2010], 862). Dreaming also plays an important part in *Leaves* (see, notably, "Old War-Dreams," *LG* 1892, 367).

41 This is not unlike the "real Me" that lurks within his public "me" that Whitman speaks of elsewhere.

42 See D. Neil Richardson's entry for "Eidólons," J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1998); also online at *whitmanarchive.org.* The poem begins "I met a seer"—like Dante's Virgil?—who leaves the speaker "Exalté, rapt, ecstatic" and feeling "orbic tendencies." Dante, of course, hoped to leave his reader feeling the same uplift at the end of *Paradiso.*

43 *Trasumanar significar per verba non si poria*—Pa1:70. *Trasumanar* seems to be Dante's neologism; it can be translated, awkwardly, a "transhumanization." It is probably somehow related to transcendentalism, a body of thought often associated with Whitman and his "master" Emerson.

44 Later in the preface, he rephrases vividly the weave of the physical and visionary in his style: "not but what the brawn of *Leaves of Grass* is, I hope, thoroughly spiritualized everywhere, for final estimate, but . . . the direct effect is a sense of the life . . . of flesh and blood, and physical urge, and animalism" (*CPW, 283*).

The juxtaposition of the real/physical and the visionary/abstract is emphasized by Auerbach in his famous Dante chapter in *Mimesis* [1953; rpt. 2003, Princeton University Press]: "The themes which the *Comedy* introduces represent a mixture of sublimity and triviality" (184); many great critics, Auerbach writes, have "felt ill at ease" with "Dante's closeness to the actual in the realm of the sublime" (185). A similar striking juxtaposition is also important in the work of that career-long Dantist T.S. Eliot: "As always with Eliot, abstraction is off-set by the taut particularity of physical things" (Anthony Lane, "On the Rocks: A Hundred Years of 'The Waste Land,'" The New Yorker [October 3, 2022], 18).

45 Notice the Ineffability Problem surfaces again here in Whitman admitting being at a loss to understand or argue out his belief. *Per verba non si poria*, indeed. Lowell put Dante's real-numinous helix in a different way when he wrote, "Dante was a mystic with a very practical turn of mind" and also that "Dante's philosophy . . . was practical, a guide for the conduct of life" (*Among My Books*, 43, 56). Lowell makes clear in his long 1894 Dante essay that the visionary thrust of the *Comedy* is embedded in the real world, calling the epic "a poem the higher aim of which is to keep the soul alive in this world and for the next" (*Among My Books*, 70).

46 "Great are the myths"; the poem was present in the 1855 *Leaves*, 93.

47 Whitman reiterated this micro-macro scope late in life, when he recalled his early desire to "formulate a poem" that would address "every concrete object, every human or other existence, not only consider'd from the point of view of all, but of each" ("A Backward Glance" *LG 1892*, 437).

48 The cosmic reach of the soul is superbly captured by Whitman in "A Song of Joys": "O the joy of that vast elemental sympathy which only the human soul is capable of generating and emitting in steady and limitless floods" (*LG 1892*, 143). Perhaps the most emphatic assertion of personality from Walt comes in the same poem:

> O the joy of a manly self-hood!
> To be servile to none, to defer to none . . .

> To confront with your personality all the other personalities of the earth.
> (*LG 1892*, 146-147)

Walt makes personality central in "To a Historian," to which we will return later: here he declares himself a reveler in his self, a poet not of "bygones" but of the future:

> Pressing the pulse of the life that has seldom exhibited itself (the
> great pride of man in himself),
> Chanter of Personality, outlining what is yet to be,
> I project the history of the future. (*LG 1892*, 11)

But in fact, the hugely "bygone" poet Dante—considered by some to be the first great chanter of Personality in western literature—could be said to have achieved the very same feat. In his Dante study Auerbach reiterates several times the centrality of the *Comedy*'s focus on the individual man's "physical as well as his spiritual being"—that is, "the unity of a single personality" of the pilgrim and the reader of the *Comedy* (*Dante*, 152). Elsewhere Auerbach restated Dante's credo in strikingly Whitmanic words: "It never crossed Dante's mind . . . that in order to be acceptable to God one must sacrifice one's particularity. Particularity was all-decisive. Character and fate are one, and the destiny of the autonomous self lies in its freedom of choice" ("On the Anniversary Celebration of Dante" [1921], in *Time, History, and Literature*, 122).

49 One poem at least is seriously astronomical, though it was dropped from *Leaves* after 1876. This short poem, "After an Interval," bears the subtitle "Nov. 22, 1875, midnight—Saturn and Mars in conjunction." Walt—after reading his own poems with "the great stars looking on—all the stars of Orion . . . and the silent Pleiades"—is delighted to see "the duo of Saturn and Mars" are still visible and have stood "so well the rest of death and night!" (*CRE*, 617). Stars are a crucial element in both poets' cosmologies. As for Dante, A. N. Wilson asserts that "Dante, more than any of the great poets, loved the stars" (*Dante in Love*, 143). Stars and stargazing also figure often in Whitman's prose writings. Perhaps most notable is this comment from *Specimen Days*: "Grandest poetic passages are only to be taken at free removes, as we sometimes look for stars at night, not by gazing directly toward them, but off one side" (*CPW*, 199).

50 The Greek *euvangelion* = good news; Old English *godspel* = good news.

51 *The Stones of Florence*, 47-48. Whole books have been written on the subject of Dante and astronomical science, most recently Alison Cornish, *Reading Dante's Stars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); see also Edward Moore, "The Astronomy in Dante," *Studies in Dante* (3rd series), 1903; M.A. Orr, *Dante and the Early Astronomers* (1914; rpt. 1969, Kennikat Press). More than a hundred passages in the *Comedy* evoke astronomical learning, and Cornish makes clear this science is deployed to poetic ends: "For Dante . . . stars are lures toward virtue, as well as to higher understanding" (143).

52 At the end of his career he did state the obvious about *Leaves*: "My book ought to emanate buoyancy and gladness" (*LG 1892*, 437).

In August 1891, when both men neared death, Symonds wrote in a letter to Walt, "The Universe sends men, from time to time, to show men how to live & die. Whitman is the last of these Avatars" (*WWWC* 8:484). Surely Symonds would have counted Dante among the first of these.

53 Whitman might have been pleased to learn that Humboldt said *Kosmos* was inspired during a visit in 1804 to America, where he actually met several times with Thomas Jefferson. Whitman may have imbibed Humboldt's benevolent view of the cosmos as not emerging from chaos, conflict, or randomness, but rather from orderliness and harmony. He may also have found appealing Humboldt's conviction that one must have a *moral* compass to navigate through Nature. "Humboldt conceived nature not as morally neutral but as a reflection of the human spirit. He stressed simultaneously the endless variety of life and the ultimate unity of nature. Humboldt's naturalistic vision inscribed humankind at the center of creation" ("Humboldt" entry by John Matteson in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* [online, *whitmanarchive.org*]).

54 *NUPM* 5:1627; see the headnote for this manuscript for a discussion of how Whitman was deemed its likely author.

55 I confess that it was not present in my St. Martin's *Selected Poems*, though now it is on the short list of poems I unwisely chose to leave out. Whitman thought it an important statement; in a late valedictory poem, of which there are many, he cites a dozen poems and two clusters (*Calamus* and *Children of Adam*) that he especially cherished as coming "From fibre heart of mine"—"Kosmos" is among them (see "Now Precedent Songs, Farewell" *LG 1892*, 403).

56 Kosmos figures significantly in one other Whitman poem, "Mediums," among which the poet counted himself: "They shall illustrate Democracy and the kosmos, / They shall be alimentive, amative, perceptive" (*LG 1892*, 364-365). Whitman brings the kosmos up much later, when talking with Traubel about "Passage to India" (to which we will return later): "the burden of it is evolution . . . the unfolding of cosmic purposes" (*WWWC* 1:157).

57 Though, stars figure in a cosmological context in a late poem, "Unseen Buds," describing trillions of buds "On earth and in the sea—the universe—the stars there in the heavens" (*LG 1892*, 421).

58 Dante met Beatrice, a Florentine nobleman's daughter, when both were age nine, apparently unforgettably. She died in 1390 at 24, three years after marrying a banker.

59 Dante, *Vita Nuova,* tr. Mark Musa (new ed.; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 32. Auerbach refers to this early phase of Dante's career as one of "free-thinking sensualism" (*Dante*, 71). Dante's *Vita Nuova*—in its youthful and amorous focus, its autobiographical elements, and place in the arc of the author's career—makes it the rough equivalent of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and the 1855 edition of *Leaves* itself.

60 *Life*, 45. Though bowing slightly to the prudes, Boccaccio's view of sexual pleasure is decidedly *laissez faire*: "Although this vice is natural, widespread and (one might say) also necessary, it is neither commendable or excusable. But who among mortals is such a righteous judge as to condemn it? I certainly cannot." That "also necessary" is worthy of Whitman. We think of Walt toning down the sexual exuberance of the early *Leaves* editions later in life when Boccaccio tells us of *Vita Nuova*, "in his later years he was very much ashamed of having written his little book." But then he adds, winningly: "if one considers his age, it is quite beautiful and pleasing" (*Life*, 46).

61 *WWWC* 3:327. Walt vividly adds: "It takes a good deal of resolution to do it: yet it should

be done—no one is safe until he can give himself a drubbing: until he can shock himself out of his complacency . . . if we don't look out we develop a bumptious bigotry—a colossal self-satisfaction, which is worse for a man than being a damned scoundrel."

62 Perhaps pertinent here is Whitman's "To a Common Prostitute," in which he promises, "Be composed—be at ease with me—I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature, / Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you" (*LG 1892*, 299).

63 Oscar Wilde perhaps phrased the same view most succinctly: "Those who see no difference between soul and body have neither" ("Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," *Chameleon*, December 1894 (*Complete Works* [HarperPerennial, 1989], 1205). The double-helix of body and soul is asserted vigorously in an easily-overlooked but Dantesquely soul-full poem, "Think of the Soul," which first appeared in the 1867 *Leaves* and begins: "Think of the Soul; / I swear to you that body of yours gives proportions to your Soul somehow to live in other spheres" (285). Whitman dropped this poem from his 1881 *Leaves*.

64 Life as a sea voyage is also elaborately played out at the end of "A Song of Joys": "O to sail to sea in a ship! / . . . A swift and swelling ship full of rich words, full of joys" (*LG 1892*, 148).

65 The review, of May 19, 1860, is reproduced in full in an appendix of my *Walt Whitman: Selected Poems* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 462-463.

66 *The Stones of Florence*, 94.

67 The fact that Latini was also himself exiled from Florence for six years before Dante was born may have bonded him in Dante's mind as he composed the *Comedy*.

68 This is not the only strangely mixed message in *Inferno*. Dante places Ulysses (Latin for Odysseus) among the False Counselors in the Eighth Circle, and yet he is celebrated there as an avatar of courageous truth-seeking. Not love for son, father, or wife, he tells the pilgrim, was able to defeat "the longing / I had to gain experience of the world / and of the vices and the worth of men" (In26:97-99).

69 Richard Kay, "The Sin(s) of Brunetto Latini," in Richard Kay ed., *Dante's Enigmas* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 19-31. Kay's last sentence: "whatever were the sins of Dante's Brunetto Latini, sexual sodomy was not one of them." Kay raises the very good question: what did sodomy actually mean in specific terms? It was in fact a very vague term, containing multitudes; in *Sodomitries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford University Press, 1992), Jonathan Goldberg argued that it was "not only a sexual term" (70) and titled the introduction to his study "That Utterly Confused Category." John Boswell, in a revolutionary and deeply researched study of attitudes toward homosexual people during the first fourteen centuries of the Christian era, avoids using the term 'sodomy' because it is "so vague and ambiguous as to be virtually useless" *(Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* [University of Chicago Press, 1980], 93).

Since this section will demonstrate that Dante's attitude toward homosexuality was far from vituperatively hostile, hence more Whitmanic, it is worth noting the main conclusions of Boswell's panoramic study of homosexuality during Christianity's first millennium: (1) in the early Roman Republic and the first Christian centuries "there appears to have been no general prejudice against

gay people" (135); (2) "moral theology through the twelfth century treated homosexuality as at worst comparable to heterosexual fornication but more often remained silent on the issue" (333); (3) it was only in the latter half of the twelfth century, *i.e.,* the century before Dante lived, that "a more virulent hostility" began to appear in literature, theology, and law (333). Boswell speculates that the sudden hostility to homosexuality in the late Middle Ages paralleled the rise in absolute governments throughout Europe and pressures for cultural and governmental uniformity (269-70). The beginning of the closing of the European mind was reflected, for instance, in the Lateran Council in 1179 which sanctioned moneylenders, Jews, heretics, Muslims, mercenaries, *and homosexuals* (277). Dante—devoted to freedom, democracy, and love—was bound to be an outlying resister to this relatively new trend, a view Walt seconded in his advice: "*Resist much, obey little*" ("To The States" *LG 1892*, 15).

70 "Sodomy in Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*," *Representations* 34 (1991), 22-24. His last sentence: "If only that Dantean love ethic had prevailed, the history of Western sexuality for the last millennium would have been quite different." On the Seventh Terrace of the Lustful in *Purgatorio*, homo and hetero sexual orientations are clearly discriminated—some think for the first time in Western literature. The pilgrim encounters a *nova gente* ("new people") that shouts "Sodom and Gomorrah" and the different-sex lustful are represented by Pasiphaë, the mythological queen of Crete who concealed herself in a cow to enjoy the services of a bull. But Dante treats them equally. They are merely traveling in opposite directions on Mount Purgatory (Pu26:76); both groups are busily purging themselves of excessive addiction to sexual pleasure. James Miller's comment on this passage, in his essay discussed below (see note 73): Dante "dared to place the 'new people' on an equal footing with their straight counterparts. To entertain such a vision of loving cooperation across the Homo-Hetero divide has only become officially unorthodox in the modern period" (262).

Miller calls Pequigney's essay "the first serious study of the *Commedia* to articulate and defend distinctively gay readings of Dante's allegorization of desire" (270). Pequigney performed a similar gay-liberating function for Shakespeare in his *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (University of Chicago Press, 1985).

71 Pequigney pursues other arguments pertinent to the subject of Dante's attitude toward same-sex desire. He makes much of the homoerotic undercurrents of the scene in which the pilgrim pictures himself as occupying the place of Ganymede when he was abducted by Zeus (Pu9.22-24), a famous mythological proxy for homosexual rape. He also suggests the homoerotic undertones of the Virgil/pilgrim bonding, noting that Dante knew the *Vita Vergilii* of Suetonius, which suggested that Virgil "liked boys"; "the record of Virgil's homoerotic temperament did not disturb Dante" (38). And he wittily notes that the popular gossip about Julius Caesar being cattily called "Queen" by his soldiers because of a rumored affair with a neighboring king is a bit of gossip retold in *Purgatorio* (see Pu26:78).

72 "The Homoerotic Subject in the *Divine Comedy*," in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 1996), 243-274.

73 "Rainbow Bodies: The Erotics of Diversity in Dante's Catholicism," in *Dante and the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*, ed. James Miller (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 249-289 (this quotation from Miller's Introduction, 43).

As we explore the subject of Dante, Walt, and same-sex love, it is apt to pause over perhaps the most prominent Dantist in Walt's circle, John Addington Symonds (1840-1893), who happens also to have been one of the nineteenth century's earliest sexologists and advocates for gay liberation. It was Symonds who urged Whitman to acknowledge that the *Calamus* cluster argued the case for

gay desire. However, Symonds had to be very discreet in his advocacy—he was married with three daughters, and homosexual acts were then forbidden by law. His elaborate argument for the decriminalization of what was then called inversion—*A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891)—came with this note: "Fifty copies of this Essay have been printed for the Author's private use." For an earlier work, *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883), about ancient homosexuality, Symonds allowed himself only *ten* privately printed copies. *A Problem in Modern Ethics* ends with several pages devoted to Whitman and hails the *Calamus* poems; it ends with fourteen legal, social, and scientific recommendations for ending centuries of discrimination. Symonds's very candid autobiography, he knew, could not appear in his lifetime—its publication came nearly a century later. Symonds is pertinent here because it is very tempting to think he was drawn to the *Comedy*--his first fame came from the *Introduction*—in part because Dante's unorthodox instincts in matters of the body and sex appealed to him. For more, see Sean Brady's edition of his essays, *John Addington Symonds and Homosexuality* (Palgrave, 2012).

74 Holsinger's inclusive take on *Paradiso* is equally feisty and Whitmanic. In its last three cantos, he asserts, "Dante explores the erotics of mystical vision" (266) and thus "queers the very end of time, universalizing the perverse bodily practices he has explored throughout the *Comedy*" (270).

75 Miller's hopeful disposition is reminiscent of a Whitman manuscript passage describing the Deity's response to seeing two men kissing: "they both saw God who smiled at them from his azure balcony . . . Love one another, said he, it is for that I have clothed your path in velvet; kiss one another . . . Love one another and if you are happy, instead of a prayer to thank me kiss again" (*NUPM* 2:449). I chose the complete passage as the epigraph for my *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (New York: Dutton/Plume, 1997).

76 Miller's gaydar sees something revealing when the pilgrim asks the invisible specter "who are you?" in "a voice of loving sentiment" (*con grande affetto*). Similarly, Miller takes an antic view of the Canto 21 appearance in flames of St. Peter Damian (inventor of the sin of sodomy, we have seen): "I see you / you clearly signaling to me your love" (Pa21:44-45). Miller's exegesis: "For a man to loose his warm desire to this particular saint, author of the homophobic *Liber Gommorianus* . . . the music of the spheres would have to slip. . . . Was Peter Damian a cloister case all along? The homosocial warmth of the encounter dispels the chilly saturnine atmosphere of the monastic life" (280).

Joan Ferrante makes much of the importance of diversity, inclusion, and variety in her study of Dante's political science: *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy* (Princeton University Press, 1984). The Whitmanic spirit of Union (in Dante, of the future *risorgimento)* is especially strong in *Paradiso*: "To achieve this desired unity, Dante does not deny the great variety in man or in the universe, he affirms it. Harmony through diversity is a theme of the canticle" (255). Ferrante's student Teodolinda Barolini has also urged a more secular and poetic, hence more Whitmanic, reading of Dante in *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton University Press, 1992) and *Dante's Multitudes* (Notre Dame University Press, 2022).

Auerbach also makes diversity a Dantean *sine qua non*: "a diversity of created things becomes necessary, in order that in their totality they may approach a perfect likeness to God"; then he almost repeats Ferrante: "in regard to creation as a whole, diversity is looked upon not as an antithesis to perfection but rather an expression of it" (*Dante*, 84). Auerbach adds that, for Dante, only in "the diverse levels of feeling and instinct" can "the entire unity and variety of the personality" begin to unfold (179). Diversity, of course, is also a key social concept for Whitman: "These States are the amplest poem, / . . . here the crowds, equality, diversity, the soul loves" (*LG 1892*, 266).

77 A. N. Wilson's comment on this passage: "Did [Dante] think with rueful amusement, when

he watched the young Adonises racing through Verona, of how much his old mentor Brunetto Latini would appreciate the sight? And was it that train of associations which had prompted him, when envisaging the shade of poor old Brunetto running across the hot sands of Hell, to think that he resembled 'one of those who run for the green cloth at Verona'?" (*Dante in Love*, 282).

78 A. N. Wilson's comment on this passage: "Ulysses . . . is one of the most attractive [figures] in the *Inferno*" and "stands for that period of Dante's life when he gave himself to intellectual journeying—and freethinking" (*Dante in Love*, 149-50). Early in his own career Whitman was similarly devoted.

79 Need one add that Dante employed the image long ago? In *Purgatorio*, he apostrophizes: "Ah, abject Italy, you inn of sorrows, / you ship without a helmsman in harsh seas" (6:76-77). The same image of "O Captain!" has also proved useful in describing Dante himself. The Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli published in 1911 these lines from his "Hymn of Italian emigrants to Dante":

> O Italy's eternal helmsman, Dante!
> You are the one who turns the prow where he wants
> On our long, foamy track!

Quoted in Stefano Jossa, "Politics vs. Literature: The Myth of Dante and the Italian National Identity," in Aida Audeh ed., *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2012), 41.

The last of the soul-searching pilgrim's guides is Bernard of Clairvaux (his prayer/poem to Mary begins Canto 33 of *Paradiso*). As Ferrante describes him, he has many Whitmanic qualities: "He is a mystic . . . a major interpreter of the biblical book of love (the Song of Solomon) . . . a political moderate who warned the papacy against becoming involved in secular affairs . . . and even something of a poet" (*Political Vision*, 305-306).

80 *An Introduction*, 137. Auerbach is eloquent on the importance of metamorphosis in the pilgrim's approach to salvation: "in every living man a metamorphosis may be hidden . . . In Paradise all the souls have undergone a transformation . . . Dante's metamorphosis is an individual human destiny" (*Dante*, 155).

81 James Miller emphasizes Dante's Whitmanic "glass half full" bias by saying that it is the opposite of the credo of Verdi's operatic villain Iago, "I believe in a cruel God"; Dante, Miller says, proclaims his belief in "an essentially good God" and in "cosmic benevolence" ("Rainbow Bodies," in *Dante and the Unorthodox*, 55-56).

82 The idea of "better voices" appearing reminds one of how Boccaccio signs off on his first Dante biography, excusing his discussion of some "flaws" in Dante's character: "I ask Dante to excuse me, who, perhaps even as I write this, may be looking down at me with a disdainful eye from some lofty quarters in heaven." Later he adds, "someone else with more talent and greater desire than mine will have an opportunity to do something finer" (*Life*, 45, 60).

83 Dante's and Walt's embrace of science was not pristine. Dante uses astrology in his *Comedy*, and Walt bought into phrenology, the pseudo-science of cranium reading, early in his career, notably using its jargon word "adhesiveness" as a code word for same-sex love.

84 And in a short essay on Darwinism, he made clear what he thought of Christian nay-sayers, calling it "a counterpoise to yet widely prevailing and unspeakably tenacious, enfeebling superstitions." The new theory, he added, "is fused . . . into such grand, modest, truly scientific accompaniments" that the world "cannot but be better'd and broaden'd by its speculations" ("Darwinism," in *Notes Left Over*, *CPW*, 326).

85 Gilchrist (1828-1885), the widow of William Blake's first biographer, fell in love with Whitman's work from afar and came to Philadelphia to court him; they became dear friends (their correspondence was later published). This poem first appeared in the *Sands at Seventy* cluster in 1888.

86 A. N. Wilson says, "Free will is a central obsession of the *Comedy*, the idea that we are not, as human beings, so programmed by the fates that moral choice is pointless" (*Dante in Love*, 313). Ferrante expresses the importance of free will in Dante thus: "Because freedom of the will is the greatest gift God gave man, surrender of that freedom in the making of a vow is the greatest gift man can make to God" (*Political Vision*, 264). That is surely why betrayers are the most horrible sinners in *Inferno*.

87 "To You" (*LG 1892*, 18). Hopples are fetters. "Wickedness is most likely the absence of freedom and health in the soul" is a pertinent aphorism jotted Walt down in a manuscript (*NUPM* 1:65). Speaking of hopples, an accoutrement of slavery, it is worth noting that Frederick Douglass kept a portrait of Dante next to one of Lincoln. Whitman's devotion to freedom was finely expressed when he spoke of his staunch defender Robert Green Ingersoll: "Ingersoll is a free man, free to his individuality, as all first-class men have been from the start" (*WWWC* 7:141). In February 1892, when Walt was on his deathbed, J. A. Symonds wrote to Traubel of the poet, "I only know that he made me a free man." He added, "a great light will be extinguished; but he lives forever in the words which he has left behind him" (*WWWC* 9:535). The praise applies as well to Dante.

88 Free will and intellect are also famously yoked together by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, where predestination is also rejected: "When Will and Reason (Reason also is choice) / Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled, / Made passive both, had served necessity, / Not me . . . " (3:108-11). Emerson also prized the intellectual rigor in Dante, calling him "the best example of tenacity in the intellectual sense; his fancy grabs with the hold of *hands*, and he describes, from his imagination, as if from his retina" (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notes*, 11:152). See Kathleen Verduin, "Emerson, Dante, and American Nationalism," in Aida Audeh, ed., *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2012), 266-81 (this passage quoted on 276).

89 That religion is included with a capital R might seem puzzling, but this too is Dantean, since Walt has just made it clear his intent here is to "drop in the earth the germs of a greater religion"—the religion of Walt Whitman. Dante proposed a kind of new personalized Catholicism, which of course made him an enemy of priests, friars, and at least one Pope. My favorite instance of Dante inventing his own theology is his notion that the Eternal Gardener will sometimes pluck the soul of a living sinner and put it in Hell to await that person's actual death. See the fate of Branca d'Oria in In33:122-38; see also Ed King, "Saving Virgil," in *Dante and the Unorthodox*, 83-106, especially 83.

90 "Souvenirs of Democracy," see my St. Martin's *Selected Poems*, 341. This phrasing was lost from the poem in 1881, when it was revised and retitled "My Legacy" (LG 376).

91 If Whitman had read Dante's treatise *De Monarchia*, he would have been pleased by its argument subversive of the Papacy's arbitrary political power (three popes excommunicated him) and favoring Republican democracy and rule by a secular emperor. *De Monarchia*—composed in Latin while in exile and obviously targeting his enemy Boniface VIII—was condemned by a Papal loyalist as a very dangerous treatise a few years after Dante died and was for centuries on the Catholic *Index of Prohibited Books* (see Miller, "Rainbow Bodies," 266). Pope Boniface published a bull in 1302 (the same year as Dante's fall from Florentine grace) that forcefully asserted church power over civil government. He, of course, is a splendid villain in Ferrante's *Political Vision*: he "seems to personify the corruption of the papacy for Dante" (74); while he reigned (1294-1303) "Boniface was accused of almost every imaginable vice" (82), and Dante's son called him "the prince of hypocritical clerics" (84). Whitman—perhaps Dante too—might have been gratified to learn that Socrates (*Symposium* 182B-D) "specifically equated acceptance of homosexuality with democracy" (see Boswell, 51). It is perhaps worth noting here that the eleventh edition (1910) of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* calls Dante "a deep and original political thinker." Devotion to democracy was also at the heart of Dante's, and Walt's, political science.

92 Boccaccio listed the charges against Dante: "fraud and corrupt practices in office, as well as extortion of money and illicit gains" (*Life*, 77). His biographer Wilson says that for the next two decades he nursed an "abject disillusionment with institutions" while never giving up "on imagining the Good Place where men and women could be 'godly and quietly governed' " (*Dante in Love*, 341). Auerbach conveys Dante's pride even more vividly: "So free of doubt and so unconditionally certain was his proud passion that he felt he was one with God" ("On the Anniversary Celebration of Dante" (1921), in *Time, History, and Literature*, 122).

93 There is perhaps a hint of the far-off Italian *risorgimento* in the hope expressed in the *Comedy*'s first canto that a future leader—not a pope but a benevolent emperor, a leader like Lincoln?—will come to "restore" *umile Italia* (In1.82) to greatness. Ferrante, in *Political Vision*, makes much of Dante's eagerness to encourage a united states of Italy (but a *secular* one, with no pope or church involved). That is why he condemns the Florence of his day in all three canticles as "a symbol of the worst kind of corruption and as a major obstacle to achieving the ideal society" (73).

94 *Life*, 45. In his perceived pride, Dante may also have reenforced the Florentine stereotype, for the "pride of the Florentines [was] as proverbial as their avarice," McCarthy tells us (*The Stones of Florence*, 117). Auerbach imagines Dante after his 1302 Florentine death sentence: "he became the lonely and desperate exile" and "the strong sense of his own worth, his haughty bearing, his inadaptability, his impatience with the trivia of everyday life added the bitterness to his lot" (*Dante*, 75). Those traits, of course, remind one of Walt.

95 The soul of Cacciaguida appears to the pilgrim in the Sphere of Mars. He was Dante's great grandfather and lived in, Dante liked to think, idyllic, uncorrupted twelfth-century Florence.

96 Whitman relives this feeling in "The Mystic Trumpeter" (*LG 1892*, 358): "Yet 'mid the ruins Pride colossal stands unshaken to the last, / Endurance, resolution to the last." Here again Walt is being very Dantean. James Russell Lowell indeed declared that "Dante was the first great poet who ever made a poem wholly out of himself" ("Dante," in *Among My Books*, 119). Lowell also said of Dante that "he swept a broad horizon from that tower of absolute self which he had reared" for the world to consider (55).

97 "After Trying a Certain Book," *Specimen Days* (*CPW*, 198). Walt's pride is also vividly boasted in "A Song of Joys" where he declares he will "live to be the ruler of life, not a slave" and that "these proud laws" will prove "my interior soul impregnable, / And nothing exterior shall ever take command of me" (*LG 1892*, 147). In *Democratic Vistas*, Walt says democracy's "second principle is individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself—personality—individualism" (*CPW*, 228).

98 "Dante," *Selected Essays 1927-1932*, 251. Hope also is important in *Inferno*, where a scared-stiff pilgrim is reassured by Virgil: "Forget your fear, no one can hinder our passage; / One [God is never named in this canticle] so great has granted it . . . feed and comfort your tired spirit with good hope" (In8:104-107).

99 The notion of divine love being like the sun's light, creating botanical beauty, returns at the end of *Paradiso* in St. Bernard's prayer to the Virgin Mary: "That love whose warmth allowed this flower to bloom / within the everlasting peace—was love / rekindled in your womb" (Pa33:7-9).

100 Eugenio Montale, in his introduction for the Mandelbaum translation, says that Dante was "considered practically incomprehensible and semi-barbarous" after his death, when the "invention of a poetry dictated by love had been forgotten" (30-31). A. N. Wilson emphasizes the primacy of love in Dante when he asserts that the "mystery at the centre of Dante's *Comedy* is that Love in the Flesh, Love in the Spirit, Love in the Individual, and Love in the Community are all one love" (*Dante in Love*, 305). Wilson also warns that any reader of the *Comedy* who hopes for Paradise can only do so "by making sense of the word 'love'" (233). Joan Ferrante is eloquent on how the Dantean kelson of love works in her exegesis of *Paradiso*, which she sums up succinctly: "Man's existence is the result of love and depends on love for its perfection" (*Political Vision*, 300). And: "Love is the great binding force between the angels and God, the universe and God, men and Gods, and men and men." That last phrase is Whitmanic, as is her conclusion that in Dante, "The love of human beings for each other, which holds society together, also prepares the soul to love God" (305).

101 Pertinent here is the prominent nineteenth-century Dantist James Russell Lowell's remark that Dante's was "the first keel that ever ventured into the silent sea of human consciousness to find a new world of poetry" ("Dante," in *Among My Books* [1894], 119). Then he cites Pa2:7: "The waves I take were never sailed before."

102 The idea of love joining the living and the dead is hauntingly paraphrased in the last words of Thornton Wilder's 1927 novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (Albert & Charles Boni, 1927): "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning" (235). This view is obviously pertinent to the *Comedy*, but it is also relevant to many passages in *Leaves*, most obviously in "Life and Death," a short late poem:

> The two old, simple problems ever intertwined,
> Close home, elusive, present, baffled, grappled.
> By each successive age insoluble, pass'd on,
> To ours to-day—and we pass on the same. (*LG 1892*, 398)

103 Love also provides the linchpin, or kelson, of Whitman's lone foray into political commentary, *Democratic Vistas*. He makes love one of the two necessary ingredients of democracy—the

other is healthy individualism: "There is another half, which is Adhesiveness or Love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all" (*CPW*, 220). Whitman memorably expresses his notion of love as a bonding/bundling agent in "Think of the Soul" in the 1867 *Leave*s: "Think of loving and being loved; / I swear to you, whoever you are, you can interfuse yourself with such things that everybody that sees you shall look longingly upon you." Then follows a Dantean fusion: "The race is never separated . . . All is inextricable—things, spirits, nature, nations—you too . . . " (*LG 1867*, 285).

104 James Miller, Introduction, *Dante & the Unorthodox*, 14. Miller sums up: "The transgressive energy of this *oltraggio* [Italian for outrage] springs from the poem itself . . . and it has left us on more than one occasion with our heads spinning" (13). The bursts of anti-Catholic/anti-papal anger are notable in *Inferno*, especially the greedy churchmen of the Fourth Circle: "clergymen, and popes and cardinals, / within whom avarice works its excess" (In7:47-48). The first iterations of *Leaves*, of course, caused similar critical *oltraggio*. Clearly, Dante's anticlericalism was intense: at least ten popes are encountered in *Inferno*, and his anti-papal *De Monarchia* was parked on the Roman Catholic *Index of Prohibited Books* for centuries. See Dennis Looney, "Dante Abolitionist and Nationalist," in Aida Audeh ed., *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 291. Dante's unorthodox Catholicism and political outlier status appealed to nineteenth-century American secularist Dantists.

105 Preface, 1876 Centennial *Leaves* edition. That "flowing" is especially apt for my purposes. Later in the preface Whitman draws his homoerotic codeword "adhesiveness" into play: "this boundless offering of sympathy—this universal democratic comradeship—this old, eternal, yet ever-new interchange of adhesiveness, so fitly an emblem of America—I have given in that book, undisguisedly, declaredly, the openest expression." The "beautiful and sane affection of man for man," he added, "mainly resides in its political significance" (*CPW*, 285). Arch-democrat and populist Whitman—perhaps Dante too—might have been pleased to learn that Socrates (*Symposium* 182B-D) "specifically equated acceptance of homosexuality with democracy" (see Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 51). Boswell also concluded that early Stoic philosophy considered "homosexuality morally neutral." The prominent Stoic Epictetus (50-130 AD) "spoke of homosexual and heterosexual attraction in terms of complete equality" (130). Epictetus's manual *Encheiridion* was a life-long *vade mecum* for Whitman from the age of sixteen: "one of my old cronies . . . the best of great teachers—is a universe in himself. He sets me free in a flood of light" (*WWWC* 2:71). Freedom and light: another *Paradiso* moment.

106 In *Paradiso*, where Dante imagines a triumphant return to Florence and receiving the poet's crown of laurel, the pilgrim answers St. James's catechism with: "Hope is the certain expectation / of future glory; it is the result / of God's grace and of merit we have earned" (Pa25:67-69).

107 There is a long note in Whitman's preface for the 1876 Centennial Edition of *Leaves* that focuses on "Passage to India" and raises its status as a kind of central credo-poem for *Leaves*: "'Passage to India,' and its cluster, are but freer vent and fuller expression to what, from the first, and so on throughout, more or less lurks in my writings, underneath every page, every line, everywhere" (*CPW,* 281). Auerbach touches on how the *io sol uno*/real Me effect rivets in the *Comedy*: "In the uncertainty of his wandering in the forest, in the Other World, which he explores and where *he alone* has as yet no definite place, he is living man in general, and every other living man can identify himself with him. The human drama, the danger confronting all who live—these are the framework of the vision" (*Dante*, 171; emphasis added). We know from "Song of Prudence" that Whitman approved of risk-taking souls. Dante was of like mind, according to Auerbach: "Most reprehensible of all to

Dante are people with no personal character, people who pass through their lives without putting themselves on the line and risking humiliation" ("On the Anniversary Celebration of Dante" (1921), in *Time, History, and Literature*, 122).

108 Whitman, in *Democratic Vistas*, memorably seconds Dante's notion of the self/soul's primacy (also Dante's allergy to hegemonic Papal power): "Bibles may convey, and priests expound, but it is exclusively for the noiseless operation of one's isolated Self, to enter the pure ether of veneration, reach the divine levels, and commune with the unutterable." (*CPW*, 234). That last phrase is a good paraphrase for the end of *Paradiso*.

109 Whitman added these lines and deleted this long one in the 1867 *Leaves*: "Doubtless I could not have perceived the universe, or written one of my poems, if I had not freely given myself to comrades, to love" (for this version see my St. Martin's Press ed., 250). The deleted version is Dantesque in its emphasis on the cosmic primacy of love.

110 "Souvenirs of Democracy" (St. Martin's *Selected Poems*, 241-242—see also *CRE* 615); the poem, much revised, was retitled "My Legacy" in 1881—*LG 1892*, 376).

111 These words are worthy of Dante's Virgil. An important part of this "realization" is coming to terms with one's sexual identity, a process Dante, of course, never had occasion or reason to express his views on. But Whitman did, and it is interesting that his "Open Road" poem is where he first used "adhesiveness" as code for same-sex love (it was jargon taken from the then-faddish pseudo-science of phrenology):

> Here is adhesiveness, it is not previously fashion'd, it is apropos;
> Do you know what it is as you pass to be loved by strangers?
> Do you know the talk of those turning eye-balls? (*LG 1892*, 124)

112 Another poignant passage suggests a superficial life of "laughter, dancing, dining, supping" that hides "a secret silent loathing and despair." A passage soon follows about people leading "duplicate" lives, "polite and bland in parlors" with "countenance smiling, form, upright"—but unseen are "death under the breast-bones, hell under the skull-bones" (*LG 1892*, 128).

113 See, notably, James Waldo Fawcett's elaborate compilation, "One Hundred Critics Gauge Walt Whitman's Fame," which appeared exactly thirty years after Whitman died (see *New York Times Book Review* [June 10, 1923], 6).

114 *Dante in Love*, 116. Wilson points to the self-praise involved in a description of the troubador poet Arnaut Daniel in *Purgatorio*: "he was a better artisan [*miglior fabbro*] of the mother tongue, surpassing / all those who wrote their poems of love" (Pu26:116-18).

115 The notion also appears in "By Blue Ontario's Shore," emphasizing his outlier perspective: "O days of the future I believe in you—I isolate myself for your sake" (*LG 1892*, 268).

116 All the Pound quotations are from an unpublished 1909 essay, "What I Feel about Walt Whitman" (1909), in *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions,

1973), 145-46. "To the Sun-Set Breeze" was first published in *Lippincott's Magazine* in December 1890, after being rejected by *Harper's*, then in the annex "Good-bye My Fancy" of *LG 1892*.

117 A very short poem that first appeared in *Sequel to Drum-Taps,* but was later dropped from *Leaves*, is "This Day, O Soul." It too seems to mimic the *Paradiso* effect:

> This day, O Soul, I give you a wondrous mirror;
> Long in the dark, in tarnish and cloud it lay,
> But the cloud has pass'd, and it is now a clean
> and bright mirror,
> Faithfully showing you all the things of the world. (*CRE* 613)

118 "Dante" (1929), in *Selected Essays 1927-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932), 234.

119 Lowell believed that Dante escaped the charge of narrow provincialism: "Dante was intensely Italian, nay, intensely Florentine, but . . . was incapable of intellectual provincialism" (*Among My Books*, 55). It may be a judgment call, but I think Whitman escapes the charge as well.

120 In the 1860 version of this poem he called himself, more like Dante, "the outsetting bard *of love*."

121 Whitman contemplated identifying the part of the poem following the aria as "The Boy and his Soul"—another Dantean touch. See *Walt Whitman's Blue Book*, *i.e.*, a facsimile of Whitman's personal copy of the 1860 edition *Leaves*, ed. Arthur Golden (New York: New York Public Library, 1968), 1:275.

122 Greek *kalamos* = reed. The plant's spadix, or inflorescence, emerges from its stalk in a shape highly reminiscent of an erect phallus. Of *acorus calamus* Walt enthused, "Leaves of Grass! The largest leaves of grass known! Calamus! . . . Profuse, rich, noble—upright, emotional!" (*WWWC* 8:361). See my discussion of the plant and its symbolism in my St. Martin's *Walt Whitman: Selected Poems 1855-1892*, 498. The "humble plant" here is remembered at the very end of *Purgatorio*, as the pilgrim returns to Beatrice for his journey to Paradise; he says he feels "remade, as new trees are / renewed when they bring forth new boughs" (Pu33:143-44).

123 This poem appears in the original version of the *Arcadia*, titled "Love-signs"—aptly for our two poets of Love; see William Ringler ed. *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford, UK, Clarendon, 1962), 81.

124 Pertinent here is Auerbach's conclusion that Dante's *Convivio* (left unfinished) and the *Comedy* "were planned as universal encyclopedias, as the sum of their creator's lifework" (Auerbach's three comments here are in *Dante*, 166, 170, 75).

# REVIEW

Maire Mullins, ed. *Hannah Whitman Heyde: The Complete Correspondence*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2022. xviii + 208 pp.

This heartbreaking volume sheds new light on Walt Whitman's family and the life of his sister, a four-decade survivor of domestic abuse. In *Hannah Whitman Heyde: The Complete Correspondence*, Maire Mullins collects the sixty-three extant letters of Hannah Louisa Whitman Heyde (1823-1908). Hannah was Walt's youngest sister and the fourth of the nine children of Louisa Van Velsor Whitman and Walter Whitman, Sr. Although she's typically a passing detail in Whitman biographies, more than one Whitman biographer has noted that Hannah was a favorite sister, much beloved by Walt and the rest of the family. At least one scholar has admitted to not understanding why Walt and the others loved her so much, but these letters and Mullins's introduction make it clear that Hannah was intelligent, kind, cheerful, and life loving. She liked school and enjoyed sewing, fashion, and clothes. She adored her family as much as they adored her.

Hannah's life changed dramatically, however, on March 16, 1852, when she married a modestly successful landscape painter named Charles Louis Heyde, whom she refers to as Charlie in her letters. Five months after their marriage in New York, the couple moved to Vermont, where they lived in an itinerant fashion in hotels and boardinghouses until settling in Burlington, Vermont, in 1856. Some biographers have said that Hannah and Charlie were a happy couple in the initial years of the marriage, but the letters collected by Mullins reveal that Hannah was frequently miserable from the moment she left New York: "I have not been happy I could not be, because Charlie has not been kind perhaps he will be better  I know he cannot be more unkind than he has been almost ever since I have been in the country" (59). Any happiness expressed in the earliest letters was infrequent and qualified: "when Charlie is kind to me I am perfectly contented and happy" (54). More characteristic were expressions of anxiety and homesickness as well as depictions of Charlie as controlling and abusive. He withheld pen, ink, and paper from her, and he would not let her have money to buy clothes or make small personal purchases. Hannah began to

self-censor in response to his prying and reading of her correspondence. He was "flighty," and "he gets so violent . . . at mere nothings" (64). He hit, pushed, and choked Hannah in addition to the harrowing verbal abuse she endured. As the years passed, his abusive behavior grew worse. He threw and broke objects like still-lit candles and mirrors. He knocked over furniture with Hannah still in it, tore apart books, and stole a volume of *Leaves of Grass* that Walt had sent her. He seems to have had affairs with other women and to have started drinking heavily, and his fits of rage grew more intense. In one letter, from 1861, for example, Hannah invited Charlie to go to bed, and he responded by saying, "shut up your god dam[n]ed jaw you mean stinking wretch" (121), and then he proceeded to choke her in their bed. This pattern of behavior persisted for the length of their marriage, until 1892, when Charlie was committed to the State Hospital in Waterburg, Vermont, and died five days later.

Health issues compounded the misery that Hannah endured as the victim of domestic abuse. Mullins proposes that the illness and pain Hannah described in her letters would be consistent with a contemporary diagnosis of endometriosis, a uterine disease marked by lingering fatigue and chronic pelvic, abdominal, and lower back pain. Such an identification of Hannah's health issues makes sense of the symptoms she describes, and it helps explain her limited mobility and chronic unwellness. Moreover, as historians of medicine have documented, endometriosis was and sometimes still is a condition often dismissed as more imagined than physiological, often associated with hysteria, female complaining, and even demonic possession. Charlie seemed to think her illness was more mental than physical—and a host of twentieth-century Whitman biographers took up this suggestion to diagnose Hannah as whiney, neurotic, hypochondriacal, hysterical, and worse. Mullins's complete edition of the letters in chronological order, along with its introduction and editorial apparatus, make such a perspective seem deeply wrong. Perhaps, one might argue, previous scholars made such mistakes because they simply did not have Mullins's edition and its resources at hand to better understand what was happening to this young woman. But why would so many scholars for so many years treat the unreliable and derogatory insinuations of a violent, gaslighting abuser as if they were a credible way to approach Hannah's marriage, personality, and suffering? The rest of Hannah's family knew that Charlie was an abusive liar, which was made clear by their letters. This volume will make these kinds of erroneous and sexist perspectives on Hannah seem not only implausible and unkind but preposterous.

While this volume dispels the notion that Hannah was neurotic or

psychotic, it does help scholars see plainly the nature of Hannah's mental health struggles. As someone who suffered with chronic illness and pain, who endured regular physical and verbal abuse from a domestic partner, and as a sibling and daughter deeply attached to her family but physically isolated from them in rural Vermont—Hannah was depressed and anxious. These letters poignantly disclose the depths of her homesickness and loneliness as well as her desire to see or to hear from her family, particularly her mother, Louisa, and her brother, Walt.

*Hannah Whitman Heyde: The Complete Correspondence* will become an indispensable resource for future Whitman scholars. It is an important addition to the lineup of scholarly editions of letters written by Walt Whitman's family and friends, such as Jerome Loving's edition of the *Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman*; Dennis Berthold and Kenneth Price's *Dear Brother Walt: The Letters of Thomas Jefferson Whitman*; and Charley Shively's two collections of letters from Whitman's friends and lovers, *Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman's Working Class Camerados* and *Drum Beats: Walt Whitman's Civil War Boy Lovers*. Expanding the work Mullins did in her digital humanities project for *Scholarly Editing* in 2016 ("The Selected Letters of Hannah Whitman Heyde"), this volume includes all of Hannah's existing letters. This scholarly edition corroborates some of what we already know about Walt Whitman's life and times and family, but it also provides a fresh perspective. Walt appears in these letters as loving, kind, and empathetic. "I never in my life see anybody so good," Hannah wrote to her mother about Walt, "I [dont] know what makes him so good." She then added, "its the kindness I care for" (145). After the death of Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, Walt became Hannah's primary correspondent, and he continued his practice of sending her new editions of his work and small sums of money, realizing that Charlie allowed her few clothes, personal items, or money. He also wanted Hannah's experience to be documented, not by her violent and dishonest husband, but by herself. He deliberately saved her letters and passed them along to Horace Traubel years later, saying about the letters "I want you to be in possession of data which will equip you after I am gone for making statements . . . . I can talk with you and give you the documentary evidence" (4).

Nevertheless, as important as this edition will be to Whitman scholars, Mullins's work might be even more important to historians of domestic violence. It is a mistake to see women like Hannah Whitman Heyde as simply passive victims of violence—a perspective that ignores their agency and survival strategies, the ways they became "Heroes of Their Own Lives," to quote the title of

Linda Gordon's classic in the field. Nevertheless, those who endure domestic violence do not often have the chance to tell their own stories in their own words. As Charlie Heyde's example suggests, survivors are threatened and gaslit into saying nothing, and when—or if—they do say something, they are either dismissed and ignored or accused of being irrational, insane, or abusive themselves. Because Hannah wrote her story slowly over years in these letters, and because Walt preserved what he could, Mullins has been able to contextualize and carefully reconstruct Hannah's sad story in her own words. For those trying to write the histories of domestic abuse in the U.S., Hannah's "documentary evidence" will be invaluable.

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# Walt Whitman: A Current Bibliography

Bloom, Harold. *Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles: The Power of the Reader's Mind over a Universe of Death*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. [In a collection of Bloom's essays that posits that reading "helps in staying alive," Chapter 10, "Walt Whitman: I Stop Somewhere Waiting for You" (379-409), is an intimate essay about Bloom's familiarity with and love for Whitman, who demonstrates for Bloom "grandeur in his capacity to love" and in his "almost miraculous empathy."]

Buckley, Jennifer. "Taylor Mac, Walt Whitman, and Adhesive America: Cruising Utopia with the Good Gay Poet." *American Theatre* (January 30, 2023), americantheatre.org. [Reprints Buckley's essay from David Román and Sean F. Edgecomb, eds., *The Taylor Mac Book: Ritual, Realness and Radical Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2023).]

Buckley, Jennifer. "Taylor Mac, Walt Whitman, and Adhesive America: Cruising Utopia with the Good Gay Poet." In David Román and Sean F. Edgecomb, eds., *The Taylor Mac Book: Ritual, Realness and Radical Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2023), 123-147. [Examines performance artist Taylor Mac's *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*, finding "Whitman's aesthetic and political place" in Mac's work to be "at its center," as "Whitman's vision of America . . . and his poetic practice of superabundance permeate the *History*"; probes the ways that both Mac and Whitman create "durational art," as "both *Leaves* and the *History* are as capacious as they are because they must make room for disorder as well as order, for disintegration and integration, for gathering and dispersal," with both artists building "imperfection and failure into their respective projects, arguing strenuously that it is because they depart from normative aesthetics that they can do real democratic work."]

Buinicki, Martin. Review of Kenneth M. Price, *Whitman in Washington: Becoming the National Poet. Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 39 (2022), 213-216.

Caddell, Jillian Spivey. Review of Ed Folsom and Christopher Merrill, *"The Million Dead, Too, Summ'd Up": Walt Whitman's Civil War Writings*. *American Literary History* 34 (Winter 2022), 1552-1554 (doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajac174).

Campion, Dan. *A Playbill for Sunset*. North Liberty, IA: Ice Cube Press, 2022. [Poems, including "The Interpreter" (16), about Abraham Lincoln reading *Leaves of Grass* aloud, beginning "When Lincoln picked up *Leaves of Grass* and read / aloud, his colleagues paused."]

Campion, Dan. "What Authorship Is Like." *Grand Little Things* (September 21, 2022), grand-little-things.com. [Poem about Whitman's notions of authorship: "So wrote Walt Whitman, / who put his name inside his song . . ."]

Campion, Peter. *Radical as Reality: Form and Freedom in American Poetry*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019. [In Part 3, one chapter—"'The Wolf, the Snake, the Hog, Not Wanting in Me': Poetry and Resistance" (207-216)—addresses the current "distaste for protest poetry" among today's readers and goes on to explore the possibilities of "political art—and how such art might prove both formally true and politically effective"; examines Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and *Democratic Vistas* as models for writing that admits "complicity," that solves "contradiction through embracing it," that "disperses throughout" the writing a "moral ambiguity" that "compel[s] us to consider a totality that evades our too-easy binaries, to imagine our actions as more mysterious and more vital than simple causes and effects."]

Courtright, Nick. "Whitman as (Non)Transcendentalist: Criticism and the Rearview Mirror of Consensus" and "Astronomy and the Uneducated Acolyte of Science: The Archive's Haves and Have Nots." *Tupelo Quarterly*, no. 26 (2022), tupeloquarterly.com. [Examines possible interpretations of Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" in relation to what is and isn't in the archive to reveal "the dangers of overfitting particulars of the archive to our interpretations" and considers whether the poem reveals a Whitman who loves science or who disdains scientific discourse; looks at the critical question of whether or not Whitman was a Transcendentalist and whether or not a "Transcendental" reading of "When I Heard" is justified.]

Daly, Christopher B. "A Declaration of Independence for Everyone." *Washington Post* (July 1, 2022), washingtonpost.com. [Suggests how Margaret Fuller, Frederick Douglass, and Whitman "challenged Americans to rise above the evils of racism, sexism and homophobia" and, together, "helped formulate a sweeping new agenda for social justice"—with Fuller tackling sexism, Douglass racism, and Whitman homophobia.]

Folsom, Ed. "Walt Whitman: An Annotated Bibliography." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 39 (2022), 230-238.

Franklin, Kelly. "Walt Whitman's Watch Over the War Dead." *Wall Street Journal* (January 20, 2023). [Offers a detailed reading of "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night," emphasizing how the poem enacts a solution to the problem of how to "maintain proper rituals of burial and grief during a catastrophic war" and how to maintain "respectful burial . . . under the pressures of battle."]

Goode, Abby L. *Agrotopias: An American Literary History of Sustainability*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022. [Chapter 4, "Sustainable Sprawl: Whitman's Eugenic Agrarianism," is a revised version of Goode's "Whitman's Eugenic Sustainability" in *ESQ* (2019).]

Goode, Abby L. "Whitman's Eugenic Sustainability." *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* 65 (2019), 692-734. [Argues that, from his early journalism and his 1856 tract "The Eighteenth Presidency!" on, "Whitman struggled to preserve Jeffersonian agrarian ideals of small farming, independent labor, and plentiful land against what he believed posed persistent threats to the nation's future: economic inequality, agricultural blight, slavery, and population degeneracy," and proposes that Whitman's tract "begins to reshape Jeffersonian agrarianism into a racial and reproductive discourse—one that envisions the American white working class as a prolific and ascendent race" as it "adapt[s] the Jeffersonian ideal of small farming to nineteenth-century concepts of selective breeding and racial improvement"; offers a reading of poems like "A Woman Waits for Me" and "I Sing the Body Electric" that recast "Whitman, the long-celebrated poet of diversity, as the architect of a disturbingly eugenic conception of American sustainability—one that aligns the land's fertility with that of a selectively-bred, agrarian population" and reveals how Whitman "synthesized . . . seemingly disparate strands of democratic agrarianism, environmental consciousness, and racial and eugenic thought, encouraging average laborers to outbreed those who ostensibly threatened the agrarian dream," as Whitman "grapple[d] with the question of *how* to achieve sustainability—how to breed a fertile population that can cultivate an equally fertile soil": concludes by looking at how "his eugenic sustainability rhetoric rears its head in *Democratic Vistas* (1871)" and how "he never lost sight of this agrarian dream, even as he grew old."]

Greenspan, Ezra. "In Memoriam: Joel Myerson (1945-2021)." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 39 (2022), 239-240. [Memorial tribute to American literature scholar Joel Myerson and his work on Whitman.]

Haldeman, Lauren. *Team Photograph*. Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 2022. [Graphic novel with poetry, about the author's encounter with the Bull Run battlefield, where she is guided by Whitman's Civil War notebooks and his poetry during her ghostly encounters with the soldiers who died there and with her own brother, who was murdered in 2012.]

Harris, Kirsten. Review of Betsy Erkkila, *The Whitman Revolution: Sex, Poetry, and Politics*. *American Literary History* 34 (Fall 2022), 1140-1143 (doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajac099).

Helm, Sally, host. "Walt Whitman's First Fan Mail." *History This Week* (July 18, 2022), history.com/history-this-week. [Podcast about Ralph Waldo Emerson's reactions to Whitman's first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*; with guests Karen Karbiener and Jerome Loving.]

Hoffman, Tyler. Review of Kenneth M. Price, *Whitman in Washington*. *American Literary History* 34 (Winter 2022), 1555-1558 (doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajac175).

Hugill, Robert. *Et Expecto Resurrectionem*. 2022. [Cantata about resurrection and life after

death, ending "in the homoerotic pantheistic transcendentalism of Walt Whitman with its celebration of Death itself" with lyrics from "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"; premiered in February 2023 at Hinde Street Methodist Church in London, England, with pianist Nigel Foster, tenor Ben Vonberg-Clark, and baritone James Atkinson.]

Johnson, T. R. Review of Stefan Schöberlein, ed., *Walt Whitman's New Orleans: Sidewalk Sketches and Newspaper Rambles. Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 39 (2022), 227-229.

Lock, Norman. *Voices in the Dead House*. New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2022. [Novel about Whitman's and Louisa May Alcott's nursing of Civil War soldiers in Washington, DC; told in the voices of Whitman and Alcott as they interact with soldiers and encounter famous figures like Abraham Lincoln, Mathew Brady, and Dorothea Dix.]

Magavern, Sam. "Calamus Project." Buffalo, NY: calamusproject.org, 2022. [Website created by Sam Magavern, with the collaboration of numerous organizations, and dedicated to the study and presentation of Whitman's "Calamus" poems; includes films of dance performances of the poems by Ujima Company (performed at Buffalo's historic Silo City); also contains commentaries on the poems, various versions of the poems, and a bibliography of criticism on "Calamus," compiled by Ed Folsom.]

Magavern, Sam. "Falling in Love with Walt Whitman." *Buffalo News* (June 24, 2022), buffalonews.com. [Discusses how the author, "over the years . . . fell increasingly under Whitman's spell" and eventually discovered the "Calamus" poems, becoming "convinced that the book is a masterpiece on par with 'Song of Myself'"; discusses new website (calamusproject.org) dedicated to that cluster of poems.]

Mendonck, Wanne. "'I Sort Rather with Those who Do Not Read': Edward Carpenter, the Religion of Socialism, and the Prophetic Agitation of Literary Form." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 77 (June 2022), 56-90. [Examines Carpenter's Whitman-inspired prose poem *Towards Democracy* (1883), viewing it "in relation to a prophetic understanding of individual political and artistic agency," "shaped by a deeply anxious self-consciousness about its political-spiritual duties," with "its prose rhythms and hyperquotidian diction strain[ing] toward an immediacy [that] chafes against its own formalism," all in service of a "prophetic authorial agency that is at the basis of his conceptualization of politics, evolution, and queer sexuality."]

Mieszkowski, Jan. *Crises of the Sentence*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019. [Chapter 2, "The Poetic Line" (84-125), focuses in large part on Whitman's attempt "to write sentences that would embody an irreducibly democratic spirit" and examines how Whitman's written "units" are "primarily syntactic, rhythmic, or semantic in character, or something of an entirely different order," ranging "over space and time, introducing various narratives and subnarratives less than it briefly alights on them and then moves on as it links past, present, and future in a tone that is part

eschatological and part fairy tale, part encyclopedia entry and part journalism," where "the individual parts do not pile up as if they were lumped together indiscriminately, but exist harmoniously in parallel—true parataxis"; goes on to examine whether or not "there is something intrinsically egalitarian about the phrasal dynamics" of Whitman's sentences themselves, and whether there is, in Whitman's work, "a domineering figure of subjectivity . . . reigning sovereign over everything."]

Montoliu, Cebrià. "Walt Whitman: L'home i sa tasca / The Man & His Work." *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics* 15 (Winter 2022), 140-147. [Offers excerpts from the preface and introduction of Catalan writer and translator Cebrià Montoliu's (1873-1923) *Walt Whitman: L'home i sa tasca* (1913), including the table of contents for the book; translated from Catalan, and with a note about Montoliu (141-142), by AKaiser.]

Morales, Miguel. "Retracing Walt Whitman's Steps Through Brooklyn and Manhattan." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* (December 7, 2022). [Illustrated essay about Whitman's thirty years in Brooklyn, offering "a list of some of the places that lent shape to book and life both," with historical contexts of various Brooklyn landmarks.]

Mukherjee, Neel. "'Specimen Days' Is Both an Ode to Walt Whitman and Its Own Portrait of America." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* (November 22, 2022). [Examines Michael Cunningham's 2005 novel *Specimen Days*, arguing that the book is Cunningham's "interlocution with Whitman": "Cunningham inscribes his own novel into the Whitmanesque space for meditation on what constitutes the soul of America."]

O'Neil, Brandon James. "Structuring the Matrix of Mourning: Walt Whitman's Quaternity Tribute to Abraham Lincoln." *Psychological Perspectives: A Quarterly Journal of Jungian Thought* 64 (2021), 397-408. [Examines "Chanting the Square Deific" from the *Sequel to Drum-Taps* and compares this poem's "surprising broadening of Trinitarian theology by the introduction of Satan as third person of a Quaternity and the gender inversion of the Holy Spirit as 'Santa Spirita'" to the "quaternity of lilac, star, hermit thrush, and memory" in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," revealing a "condensed theology and its application" as Whitman "articulate[s] his—and his nation's—grief over loss."]

Parlett, Jack. *Fire Island: A Century in the Life of an American Paradise.* New York: Hanover Square Press, 2022. [Offers a gay artistic history of Fire Island on Long Island; Chapter 1, "A Spit of Land," examines Whitman's connections to Fire Island, including his love of Jayne's Hill, near his birthplace in West Hills, from which he could see Fire Island in the far distance; muses that "Whitman would surely have loved what Fire Island became in the early twentieth century, a liberating world away from the din and spectacle of the city"; recounts Oscar Wilde's 1882 visit to Whitman in Camden, New Jersey, and then Wilde's supposed trip to Cherry Grove on Fire Island a few months later and finds it "tempting to look for a point of origin around which to organize and narrate, to visualize Whitman and Wilde on Fire Island's beaches in the

late nineteenth century like gay patron saints blessing its shores"; settles for the ways that "Wilde's and Whitman's influence has continued to impact Fire Island's culture and queer history at large."]

Perry, William P. "Walt Whitman and the Civil War." *Berkshire Edge* [Great Barrington, MA] (January 22, 2023), theberkshireedge.com. [Offers a very general overview of Whitman and the Civil War, with extensive quotations from his poetry.]

Schöberlein, Stefan; Stephanie M. Blalock, Kevin McMullen, and Jason Stacy. "Walt Whtiman, Editor at the *New-York Atlas*." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 39 (2022), 189-208. [Presents substantial evidence that Whitman was an editor of the *New-York Atlas* at the time the newspaper printed his series on "Manly Health and Training" (1858); argues that "Manly Health and Training" was not "a tossed-off piece for quick remuneration" but rather a serious project that Whitman hoped to turn into a book, revealing "another unrealized career path for Whitman's writing life in the late 1850s"; proposes that Whitman's tenure at the *Atlas* likely began around 1857 and ended by 1860; reprints as an appendix (205-208) a previously unknown piece published in the *Atlas* about "Manly Health and Training."]

Schwiebert, John E. *Walt Whitman: A Companion*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2022. [An encyclopedic set of 142 alphabetically-arranged entries, all by Schwiebert, that "address [Whitman's] major poetry and prose, unpublished writings, literary and cultural contexts, literary style and techniques, and people and places significant in Whitman's life," with each entry followed by "suggestions for further reading"; also contains "an introductory essay on Whitman's significance in his own time and his enduring legacy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries," "a brief biography and a chronology of Whitman's life and work," an appendix of "ideas for writing" like and about Whitman, based on Whitman's own writing habits; and an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources, all by Schwiebert.]

Sederat, Roger. "'The Battle Trumpet Blown!': Whitman's Persian Imitations in *Drum-Taps*." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 39 (2022), 163-188. [Acknowledges previous studies of Whitman's thematic use of the Orient but points out that, aside from observations of specific Persian signifiers in "A Persian Lesson," his engagement with the poetry of Iran has remained especially speculative and therefore analogical, with studies like J. R. LeMaster and Sabahat Jahan's *Walt Whitman and the Persian Poets* showing how his mystical relation to his own religious influences tends to resemble the Sufism of Rumi and Hafez; sets out to propose a new approach by examining Whitman's personal copy of William Alger's *The Poetry of the East* (1856) along with his reading of Emerson's 1858 essay "Persian Poetry," which reveal a rather subtle yet sustained attempt to directly imitate the foreign verse throughout much of *Drum-Taps* (1865); argues that Whitman's reliance upon identifiable foreign models to depict what he deemed his nation's most significant historical moment coincides with a dramatic shift in Whitman's style of writing, as his poems came to mimic translations of this poetry,

revealing a Whitman even more personally invested in Persian verse than previously known, as he employs it to surrender the distinct Romantic individuality of his earlier poems for the greater spiritual preservation of his conflicted nation.]

Seery, John E. Review of Morton Schoolman, *A Democratic Enlightenment: The Reconciliation Image, Aesthetic Education, Possible Politics*. *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 39 (2022), 216-219.

Senses Fail. *Hell Is in Your Head*. Berkeley, CA: Pure Noise Records, 2022. [CD, with the first half of the album based on T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the second half responding to Whitman's "To Think of Time"; lyrics by Buddy Nielsen, lead singer and guitarist.]

Tarin, Sophia, ed. *Starting from Paumanok* 32 (2020-2021). [Newsletter of the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association, with news of association activities, including, in this issue, the announcement of Juan Felipe Herrera as the Birthplace Association's 2020 Poet-in-Residence and Forrest Gander as the 2021 Poet-in-Residence, as well as a recap of the celebration of Whitman's 200th Bicentennial in 2019.]

Turpin, Zachary. "'The Indications' (1857): An Early Whitman Imitation." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 39 (2022), 209-212. [Reprints and examines a previously unknown "non-parodic Whitman imitation," entitled "The Indications," published in *Life Illustrated* in 1857; considers whether it could have been written by Whitman himself or is instead "a careful imitation of Whitman" and concludes it is likely "simply a perceptive and well wrought early imitation of Whitman's poetry, possibly written by (and certainly published by) someone who knew Whitman personally."]

Valentino, Russell Scott. Review of Caterina Bernardini, *Transnational Modernity and the Italian Reinvention of Walt Whitman, 1870-1945*. *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 39 (2022), 224-226.

Whitley, Edward. Review of Nicole Gray, ed., *Leaves of Grass* (1855) *Variorum*. *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 39 (2022), 219-224.

Unsigned. "Walt Whitman Research Added to Bowen Archive." *The Intelligencer* [Edwardsville, Illinois] (December 7, 2022). [Reports that "The Douglas and Betty Noverr Collection of Walt Whitman's Journalism" has been added to the Bowen Archive at the library of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville; the collection contains "notes, letters, and transcripts . . . regarding Whitman's journalism between 1848 and the 1880s" gathered by Whitman scholar Douglas Noverr, an editor of Whitman's journalism, and will be overseen by Southern Illinois professor Jason Stacy, who has co-edited Whitman's journalism with Noverr.]

*The University of Iowa* Ed Folsom

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*Essays*: Place the author's name two inches below the title and the institutional affiliation at the end of the essay. (Note: this information will be excised for peer review by the editor.)

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### QUOTING AND CITING WALT WHITMAN'S WORK

When quoting from individual editions of *Leaves of Grass* (the 1855, 1856, 1860, 1867, 1870-1871, 1881, 1891), please use the facsimiles available online on the *Walt Whitman Archive*, and cite the edition, date, and page numbers, followed by "Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org)." Do not list the URL of individual page images or the date accessed. After the initial citation, contributors should abbreviate as "*LG*" followed by the year of the edition and the page number (e.g., *LG*1855 15).

The standard edition of Whitman's work is the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org) in addition to *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, twenty-two volumes published by the New York University Press under the general editorship of Gay Wilson Allen and Sculley Bradley, and supplemented with volumes published by the University of Iowa Press and Peter Lang. Citations and quotations from Whitman's writings not yet available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* should be keyed to the specific volumes in this edition.

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| | |
|---|---|
| EPF | *The Early Poems and Fiction*, edited by Thomas L. Brasher (1963) |
| PW | *Prose Works 1892*, edited by Floyd Stovall. Vol. 1: *Specimen Days* (1963); Vol. 2: *Collect and Other Prose* (1964).<br>with a Composite Index (1977); Vol. 7, edited by Ted Genoways (2004). |
| DBN | *Daybooks and Notebooks*, edited by William White. 3 vols. (1978). |

| | |
|---|---|
| NUPM | *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, edited by Edward F. Grier. 6 vols. (1984). |
| Journ | *The Journalism*, edited by Herbert Bergmann, Douglas A. Noverr, and Edward J. Recchia. Vol. 1: 1834-1846 (1998); Vol. 2: 1846-1848 (2003). |
| Corr | *The Correspondence*, edited by Edwin Haviland Miller. Vol. 1: 1842-1867 (1961); Vol. 2: 1868-1875 (1961); Vol. 3: 1876-1885 (1964); Vol. 4: 1886-1889 (1969); Vol. 5: 1890-1892 (1969); Vol. 6: A Supplement; Vol. 7: edited by Ted Genoways (2004). |

For Whitman's correspondence, letters available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* take precedence over the *The Correspondence* edited by Edwin Haviland Miller. These should be cited in this format: Sender to recipient, month, day, year, followed by "Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*, ID: xxx.00000."—e.g., Herbert Gilchrist to Walt Whitman, August 20, 1882. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*, ID: loc.02192.

Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (9 Vols) is available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*. After an initial citation followed by "Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org)," it should be abbreviated *WWC*, followed by its volume and page number (e.g. *WWC* 3:45).

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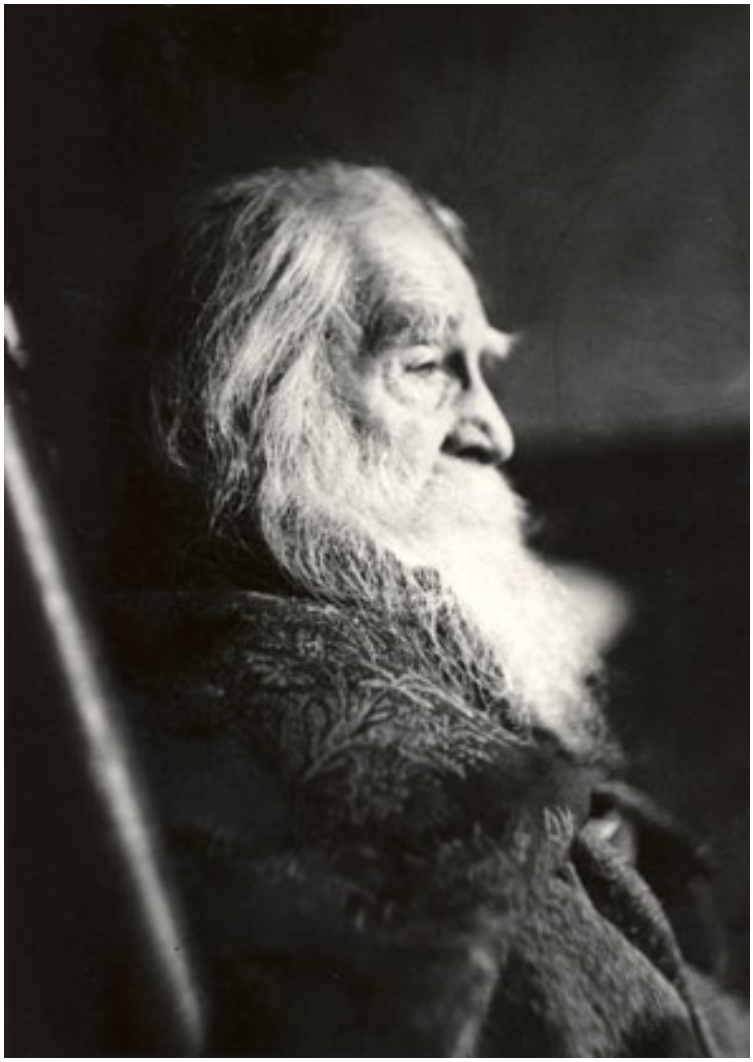

Whitman and Dante. Portrait of Whitman by Thomas Eakins, 1891. Portrait of Dante ("Ritratto di Dante Alighieri") by Sandro Botticelli, c. 1495.