

Walt Whitman:
Death, the Afterlife, and His Poetry of Contact
by
Brian Burlage

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Abstract

This thesis offers an analysis of Walt Whitman's poetic treatment of death in his Civil War-era elegies and explores the ways in which he constructs a literary representation of the afterlife. F.O. Matthiessen argues throughout his book *American Renaissance* that Whitman's language has roots broad and low, close to the ground, and that it mimics the "free growth" of natural plants and life forms. Kerry Larson builds on this rhetoric of organicism by suggesting that Whitman's language is distinguished for its vitality and for the springing-forth motion it recreates. While critics and scholars have historically separated the subjects of organicism and death in Whitman's poetry, this thesis shows how one is, in fact, essential for understanding the other.

The approach I adopt for this analysis involves discourse specifically related to language and embodiment. Drawing from Drew Gilpin Faust's cultural study of mourning and memorialization rituals in America during the Civil War, and utilizing Michael Moon's theory about bodily dissemination and Isaiah Berlin's philosophies about absorption and materialism, I analyze what happens when Whitman, the poet of contact and nearness, takes on death as his topic. The first chapter details Whitman's personal experiences as a volunteer nurse in Civil War hospitals; the second offers a critical overview of organicism and how it functions in Whitman's elegies; the third provides a close reading of "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life"; the fourth builds on that close reading and looks at "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"; and the fifth examines the culmination of Whitman's writing about death in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

Each of these analyses illuminates Whitman's highly complicated and nuanced belief about death, and more specifically, that death was *not* a point of separation between the living and the deceased. I incorporate readings related to arrangement and disarrangement, song and translation, and poesis and nation-building to present a view of Whitman's elegies not yet accounted for in the critical field. Furthermore, in this thesis, I perform the crucial task of establishing the inextricable connection between organicism and death to show how they both extend the notion of contact across the boundary of mortality and into Whitman's greatest poetic construction: a representative afterlife.

Key Words: death, afterlife, organicism, elegy, embodiment, nation-building, mourning

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Introduction

In a 2011 interview with *Harper's Magazine*, Harold Bloom said of Walt Whitman: “[he] was a heroic individualist; he was marked by enormous kindness towards his fellow man. From 1863 to 1867, he tended to between 35,000 and 40,000 men in hospitals – Yankees and Confederates alike. He did this as a volunteer, as a lover of humanity. He brought them bags of peppermint, sips of brandy.”¹ Bloom’s remark frames Whitman the man, the citizen, in an important way – he was not simply a poet, but a champion of the American soul. Whitman spent the better part of a decade serving injured soldiers in Civil War hospitals as a volunteer nurse. Beyond the duty, charity, and honor that compelled him to do so, Whitman served those men because he loved them as fellow human beings and countrymen. In his poetry and journaling, in his newspaper writing and speeches, Whitman proves himself to be the poet of contact, one who stands in the room with you.² “Whoever you are, I fear you are walking the walk of dreams,” he writes in “To You,” “Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that you be my poem.” The immediacy of these lines – characteristic to most of Whitman’s most powerful writing – is astonishing for the idea it puts forward: by placing the “hand” of his poetry upon you, Whitman moves you into a reality that is more surreal and may impact you more than “walking the walk of dreams.”

This act of poetic contact – which extends to sense, language, and spirituality – is especially significant to Whitman in his elegiac writing and poetry about death. For most nineteenth-century American writers, death meant the end of familial and friendly bonds, the

¹ The interview was about Bloom’s then latest work called *The Anatomy of Influence*, in which he places Whitman at the center of the American canon.

² In addition to writing poetry, Whitman was a prolific journalist earlier in his life as well as a respected lecturer and public speaker later in his life. He published several volumes of journals detailing his experiences during the Civil War. He also published numerous essay collections.

separation of body and soul. In “Thanatopsis,” which translates literally to ‘view of death,’³ William Cullen Bryant, a well known poet in the early republic, writes about the nature of dying and contemplates the ultimate destination of the soul, arguing that each of us travels to the “great tomb of man,” where “millions in those solitudes, since first / The flight of years began, have laid them down / In their last sleep – the dead reign there alone.” The word “alone” holds particular resonance here, both for its connotation of remoteness and because the line is mostly composed of strong iambic, single-syllable words. Bryant believes that death renders us “alone” and places us in a state of being away from things. Ralph Waldo Emerson describes similar instances and implications of dying in “Terminus,” the last poem he would ever write: in death “Fancy departs: no more invent; / Contract thy firmament / To compass of a tent.”⁴ Emerson poses that to die is to reduce one’s “firmament” and stake in life to the small space of a “tent.” In other words, death delivers us to some sort of confinement, a space with boundaries, removed from “fancy” and “invent[ion].”

Comparatively, Whitman’s elegies express openness about the afterlife and are filled with life-affirming imagery like flowers and mother-child bonds. He departs from his contemporaries in his belief about the indestructibility of matter, which he frequently and tropically applies to the soul. Whitman surveys nature and believes its constant cycling of material things to be a system of self-generation and renewal: a deceased body is digested into the soil, absorbed by the earth, and utilized to facilitate the growth of new materials. The soul maintains itself in a separate but still accessible space throughout this process – it is not, like the body, consumed and reproduced.

³ Root meanings: *thanatos* = death; *opsis* = view, contemplation.

⁴ Emerson and Whitman’s correspondence and relationship began following the 1855 publication of *Leaves of Grass*, when Emerson wrote a letter to Whitman saying, “I greet you at the beginning of a great career.”

Whitman makes this evident in his poem “Ashes of Soldiers,” part of a larger collection called *Songs of Parting*. He writes:

But aside from [the] marts of the wealth and the crowded promenade,
 Admitting around me comrades close unseen by the rest and voiceless,
 The slain elate and alive again, the dust and debris alive,
 I chant this chant of my silent soul in the name of all dead soldiers.

Faces so pale with wondrous eyes, very dear, gather closer yet,
 Draw close, but speak not.

Phantoms of countless lost,
 Invisible to the rest henceforth become my companions,
 Follow me ever—desert me not while I live.

Sweet are the blooming cheeks of the living – sweet are the musical voices sounding,
 But sweet, ah sweet, are the dead with their silent eyes.

This passage is a good example of Whitman’s approach to death and it advances a vital claim about the dead: they are not, as Bryant, Emerson, and other nineteenth-century writers say, isolated or separated from the living. Instead, they may become “companions” that “draw close, but speak not.” My thesis argues that Whitman’s elegiac project – especially his three major Civil War elegies “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” – gives voice to the “lost” and “silent” dead by reconnecting them with the living. Thus, Whitman’s poetry must be regarded in terms of contact, and his aim is two-fold: he seeks to reengage the dead with the living and simultaneously touch us, his readers, with the feeling and profound meaning of such reunion.

To help cement the logic and strength of my thesis, I draw from a constellation of scholarly work that, taken all together, provides many necessary points of insight but ultimately overlooks the nuances and consequences of Whitman’s handling of death. My research begins with *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*, as David S. Reynolds traces the influence of Whitman’s poetic management of mortality to the teachings of Epicurus, who preached that

matter is entirely interchangeable. Matter evolves from state to state and can move from one place to another; it combines to form new structures, but it never loses its essence. Whitman is especially captivated by the notion of decomposing matter's ability to create new life (i.e., new plants sprout from the soil formed by other dead plants). Such cyclical systemization of the natural world fits with Lucretius's principles of the ebb and flow of nature – the way in which, for example, the atoms of the ocean collide and break apart in endless rhythm. Whitman took these ideas and applied them to his poetry about carnal violence in the Civil War.

For Whitman, to simply name and describe the tragedy of death was an insufficient measure of devotion; it could not heal the nation that he calls “essentially the greatest poem.” Instead, his language needed to be earthy and organic, it needed to feel substantial to those reading it. F.O. Matthiessen argues throughout his book *American Renaissance* that Whitman's language has roots broad and low, close to the ground, which is made possible by his fine-tuned attention to the sacredness of the human body. Even in death, the body – like language – becomes a natural product that allows for the growth of other products. Whitman wants readers to perceive of *Leaves of Grass*, the leaves of the pages and leafiness of the poems, as “the beautiful uncut hair of graves” that indicates the perennial progression of life over death. He envisions his elegies to be “uncut,” free to spread and grow from the memory of the people they describe and exist as the “beautiful” living manifestation of such memory.

If such studies concerning poetic language and form contribute to a dialogue about the body of the text, then Michael Moon's *Disseminating Whitman* advances dialogue about the body of the poet himself – the comforting presence that Whitman insists emanates from the page. Moon articulates several intricate theories about embodiment in Whitman's poetry, particularly as it relates to the problem of representing death. He argues, as other scholars have, that

Whitman continually strives to alleviate symptoms of grief, melancholia, and mourning in the general American public. To do this, Whitman effectively “disseminates affectionate physical presence” from himself to the reader, a presence to be sensed not only with mind but also felt symbolically with body. He focuses the poetry’s energies on establishing a space in which the presence of the poet may lovingly engage with readers.

In his book *Whitman’s Drama of Consensus*, Kerry Larson weaves many of these analyses into a single, coherent argument that describes the “pure process” of Whitman’s poetry, which, Larson suggests, inaugurates a new discourse that is without beginning or end. Drawing from Matthiessen’s points about organicism and “free growth” in Whitman’s poetry, Larson argues further that in this pure process of natural and self-directed language, there is blockage on occasion, or instances when images of beginning and end get telescoped together. These instances are the antitheses of pure process, Larson elaborates, as when infants are taken too soon out of their mothers’ laps or when a sprout that is about to grow gets stunted. In such moments of antithesis, beginning and end coexist. I argue that this commingling of beginning and end is actually a literary representation of an afterlife, the culminating feat of Whitman’s writing about death.

The central problem in the critical field surrounding Whitman’s work about death is multipronged: contrary to many scholars’ opinions, “As I Ebb’d,” “Out of the Cradle,” and “Lilacs” extend the idea of contact across the boundary of death, and should be construed as a single poetic unit; too many critical works bypass the pivotal biographical circumstances of Whitman’s contact with thousands of dying and dead soldiers, an experience that deeply embeds itself in his poetry; finally, there exists no comprehensive work or treatment specifically about how death manifests and is embodied in Whitman’s poetry. My thesis takes contact and death,

two concepts that scholars have long thought of as fundamentally separate, and argues that they are in fact complementary to one another. My thesis addresses these issues and fills these gaps by offering new interpretations of much-studied works.

My first chapter details a critical history of Whitman's experiences as a nurse in hospitals during the Civil War, during which he encountered thousands of wounded and dying soldiers in extremely intimate settings. In September of 1861, Whitman's brother George enlisted in the Fifty-first New York Volunteers and fought for the Union. George frequently sent reports of his experiences home, and, when he was wounded at Fredericksburg in 1862, Whitman went to the battlefield and then to Washington to obtain a government clerkship as a volunteer nurse in war hospitals. I argue that, in part, as a result of his direct contact with death and war, Whitman came to see the Civil War as a kind of evolution that mercifully "cleared the atmosphere like a thunderstorm" in order for new life to emerge, and this new perception informed many of his revisions to older poems like "As I Ebb'd" and "Out of the Cradle."

In chapter two, I frame some of the devices Whitman uses to represent the figure of death in his poetry – such as oratory, music, and the ocean – as well as his joining of materialism with idealism and subsequent rejection of their duality, his symbolic manifestation of death as a maternal figure, and his personalized rituals of mourning. By outlining and explaining the many subtleties of Whitman's poetics, I show how his "pure process" of "free growth" actually mimics generative action and reflects life's perpetuation beyond death. The chapter also consists of an extended analysis of Whitman's linguistic and poetic strategies for integrating "Personality" (as he calls it in his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*) into the text as a way to conceptualize the presence of bodies.

Chapter three features a close reading of “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean Life,” a poem in which Whitman begins to articulate his notion of representing a connection between the dead and the living. I identify how indirection, arrangement, and disarrangement mirror the violent, war-inflicted collapse of whole bodies into disparate parts and illuminate how Whitman’s task as the speaker in the poem is, partly, to recompose those parts into another whole. More specifically, I argue that Whitman enacts this process of disarrangement, as he dissolves himself into debris on the shore to imagine occupying a state of death. From this state of confused existence, Whitman then instructs the readers about how to take up the task of recomposition themselves. In this way, Whitman brings the reader into the process of imagining the states of being during and after death.

My fourth chapter argues that “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” shows death not to be a point of severance from the living but rather a different type or part of existence. In this poem, Whitman describes and establishes an active exchange between life and death as two modes of existence, whereupon he stands as organizer and interpreter at the center. Moreover, I analyze particular rituals of mourning included in the poem with the aim of suggesting that, for Whitman, mourning makes the body a repository of identity, invested with the personalities, thoughts, and anxieties of the dead that affords them continued life. I conclude the chapter with a new reading of the poem: Whitman counts himself among the eggs of the mocking-birds and among other death-affected beings to support his effort to reconnect the living and the dead.

The last chapter of my thesis examines “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” as a culmination of many of Whitman’s poetic processes, developments, and beliefs about death. I draw a link between the breaking of a sprig of lilac and the breaking of the golden bough in the *Aeneid* – it is, in essence, an act of founding, symbolic of staking claim in a new land. Of

course, in the *Aeneid*, the new land becomes Rome, but, in Whitman's poem, the new land becomes a kind of afterlife. I look to section 14 of the poem – renowned among scholars for its difficulty – and argue that the speaker's walking hand-in-hand with the knowledge and thought of death on either side of him corresponds directly to the poem's opening stanza, in which the word "ever-returning" is wedged in the middle between two similar embodiments of death. This is a deliberate maneuver, as Whitman himself, along with all the deceased and living bodies and souls he gives voice to, are rendered "ever-returning" and brought together into the afterlife he has constructed.

Chapter 1: “The Word is Become Flesh”

At the end of Walt Whitman’s 1891 edition of *Leaves of Grass* – the last he would publish in his lifetime – the poet envisions himself “depart[ing] as air” into “the vapor and the dusk,” becoming a part of the world that remains “untranslatable” (*LOA* 247).⁵ In Section 52, the conclusion to the 1891 version of “Song of Myself,” Whitman resigns himself to the processes of nature that take composed matter, break it into its elements, and scatter the disarranged pieces so that new arrangements may be formed. Though he never names or categorizes this process, he tries to make it personal and close-at-hand: “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.” At the beginning and end of our lives, Whitman argues, we are essential, organic energy. Mankind originates from and eventually dissolves into the same plane of interchangeability.⁶

Like the whole of “Song of Myself” and the broader project of *Leaves of Grass*, these lines articulate the synthesis of life and death into something immediate and near to us – something that *defines* us. Life and the forms of life are returned to their primal energies only through the process of death, which renders them into distinct elements that recombine to allow for life to spring up again in another form. It is this sense of life springing from the dead, in fact, that initially captured Whitman’s poetic fascination, as he explains in the Preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855): “Past and present and future are not disjoined but joined. The greatest poet forms of the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet...” (*LOA* 13). The poet, in

⁵ All references to Whitman’s poems are drawn from the Library of America’s *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, edited by Justin Kaplan. In-text citations will be abbreviated by *LOA*.

⁶ Theories about the interchangeability of matter, especially in this thesis, will rely on Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*, particularly the chapter entitled “Confutation of Other Philosophers.”

Whitman's view, is tasked not only with articulating the progression of life from death, but also with emulating or recreating the same progression in his or her own poetry.

A problem arises, then, from this line of thinking: how can Whitman, or any poet for that matter, articulate the transformation of matter, the unobservable link between life and death, without experiencing it first-hand? In other words, and in Whitman's particular case, how can a poet accurately or honestly write about death without having died or experienced death directly? An answer begins to surface, partly, in F.O. Matthiessen's preface to his book *American Renaissance*, in which he explains the relationship between a poet's language and experience. He writes, "An artist's use of language is the most sensitive index to cultural history, since a man can articulate only what he is, and what he has been made by the society of which he is a willing or unwilling part" (Matthiessen xv). A man can only write of what he is or of what has become a part of him. Matthiessen's claim is especially useful for thinking about Whitman, whose understanding of death was explicitly and continually shaped by the tragic immediacy of the Civil War.

Whitman's time as a volunteer nurse in Civil War hospitals brought him into day-to-day contact with the reality of death, as he acutely experienced the facts and stories he expressed in his poems. In *Walt Whitman's America*, David S. Reynolds traces the poet's extensive involvement in the war effort, which began when his brother George joined the Fifty-first New York Volunteers in September of 1861 (Reynolds 410). Reynolds shows that, at least initially, Whitman "got an intimate look at the war through his brother George" (Reynolds 410), who served in 21 general engagements against the Confederate Army, including Antietam, the

bloodiest single-day battle in American history.⁷ George frequently wrote letters home from the front and described the terrors of battle in vivid detail. He also kept a soldier's diary that Whitman considered "one of the most powerful records of the war" (Reynolds 410).

However, the situation took a drastic turn when on December 16, 1862, Whitman read the name "G.W. Whitmore" among the casualties listed in the *New York Tribune* following the Battle of Fredericksburg. Fearing it might be his brother, "Walt immediately started south to find George and assess the seriousness of the [injury]" (Reynolds 411). After searching for him in vain throughout hospitals in Washington D.C., Whitman traveled to Falmouth, Virginia where he had heard George's regiment was camped. There, faced for the first time with the severity and brutality of the war, Whitman was greeted by "a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, and hands outside the camp hospital" (Reynolds 411). Amid the carnage, he found George, who had been struck by an exploding shell and suffered only a minor cheek wound.

Whitman remained at the camp in Falmouth through the rest of December, visiting with as many wounded soldiers as possible while he helped George recuperate. His time in Falmouth left a lasting impression on him, and he painstakingly described the images and people that marked him, recording scenes that consisted of "fresh graves, mostly of officers, their names on pieces of barrel-staves or broken boards, stuck in the dirt" (*LOA* 712).⁸ Despite Whitman's best efforts to make a similarly lasting impression on the soldiers, however, he often felt helpless and inconsequential. In his entry "After First Fredericksburg," written between December 23 and 31, he notes, "It is pretty cold. The ground is frozen hard, and there is occasional snow. I go around from one case to another. I do not see that I do much good to these wounded and dying; but I

⁷ From James M. MacPherson's *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam, The Battle That Changed the Course of the Civil War*. Refer to the Works Consulted page for a full citation.

⁸ From his compendium of journals later called *Specimen Days*, which is included in the Library of America edition.

cannot leave them” (*LOA* 713). Though Whitman describes feelings of insecurity and personal insufficiency in handling a problem as massive as war casualty, he admits that the dismay of the “wounded and dying” enthralls him. Injury begs human intervention, and Whitman’s ultimate assistance to the suffering would be his poetry, in which he refused to “leave them.”

As he returned home to Washington in January, he devoted himself to his “new life mission”: volunteering as a nurse in Civil War hospitals (Reynolds 411). He immediately sought a government clerkship that would support this aim, and he petitioned Ralph Waldo Emerson – an admirer of Whitman’s early poetry and a powerful presence in Washington – to intervene with political officials on his behalf. Though the effort was unsuccessful, Whitman did eventually find work in an army paymaster’s office and wrote war stories for newspapers on the side (Reynolds 412). He kept his schedule light and flexible so that he could spend a substantial portion of his time volunteering in hospitals throughout the Washington area. As the weeks and months went on and he came into contact with more and more of the wounded and dying, Whitman felt the enormous difficulty of the task at hand: “Of scenes like these, I say, who writes – whoe’er can write the story? Of many a score – aye, thousands, north and south, of unwritten heroes, unknown heroisms, incredible, impromptu, first-class desperations – who tells?” (*LOA* 724). Whitman began to see death as a problem of speaking and telling, that there was some impossible aspect to its utterance. It was during this time that he became most aware of the difficulties and complexities inherent to articulating what death meant generally to mid-nineteenth-century Americans.

Whitman’s experience with soldiers gave him a particular view of the minds of Americans, and he transferred meanings of death from the particular war demographic to the greater public. He writes from the battlefield in February 1864, “Along and along [the soldiers]

filed by me, with often a laugh, a song, a cheerful word, but never once a murmur. It may have been odd, but I never before so realized the majesty and reality of the American people *en masse*. It fell upon me like a great awe” (*LOA* 740). He saw in soldiers the manifest body and spirit of the American masses – optimistic and steadfast, despite the arduous conditions of war. Therefore, to begin to understand how Whitman poeticized mid-nineteenth-century American belief about death, we must first consider what it meant to the soldiers who helped shape his views.

Drew Gilpin Faust, in her book *This Republic of Suffering*, details how a “rhetoric of service” (Faust 6) penetrated the minds of soldiers. This rhetoric compelled them to rationalize the violence of war by casting it as an apparatus of national, religious, and familial imperatives. Faust argues that choosing to focus on “dying rather than on killing enabled soldiers to mitigate their terrible responsibility for the slaughter of others” (Faust 6). In this light, death becomes an entity that operates independently and of its own accord, and the soldiers are simply expected to let death perform its work. This way of approaching violence separates death from mankind: death is given agency, and humans may remain free from the guilt of committing war atrocities.

Accordingly, such prolonged and intensified emphasis on death created a space for the concept of the Good Death (*ars moriendi*) to emerge. The concept, Faust argues, advances the idea that “dying was an art” and that there were “rules of conduct” to be followed when confronting despair, betrayal, sacrilege, and other terrors of war (Faust 6). To die a Good Death was to “pattern one’s dying” around a model of grace, humility, and strength. Whitman observed the tradition of the Good Death in his time as a nurse, noting, “There is no fuss made. Not a bit of sentimentalism or whining have I seen about a single death-bed in hospital or on the

field” (*LOA* 736). For most soldiers, to be resolute in the face of suffering demonstrated the highest degree of honor in service.

Whitman did enter and share in the phenomenon of *ars moriendi* in his volunteer nursing, as he would often write letters on behalf of the dying soldiers to convey important information to families removed from the front. He recalls of his time in Fredericksburg with George, “I went through the rooms, downstairs and up. Some of the men were dying. I had nothing to give at that visit, but wrote a few letters to folks home, mothers, &c” (*LOA* 712). Essentially, by fulfilling the duties of dying soldiers, opening lines of communication between distant friends and families, Whitman served as a surrogate mourner of the dead (Faust 123). More importantly, however, Whitman served both as a surrogate family member away from home and as a dedicated record keeper, and in doing so, he created spiritual, familial, and material ties across time and space. This practice would set the framework for his later war poetry, which, like the surrogate letters, become something of a *memento mori*, an object that retains some effectual, intelligible part of a departed soul.

In this way, Whitman’s poetic ambitions – making his poems relics for the perpetuation of ties across the constraints of time and space – surrounding the representation of death start to cohere. Whitman’s early reflections on these ambitions appear in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* Preface: “The poet shall not spend his time in unneeded work. He shall know that the ground is always ready ploughed and manured ... others may not know it but he shall. He shall go directly to the creation” (*LOA* 11). The double meaning in reference to the “ploughed and manured” ground is important, as it directly addresses the notion of life springing from death. The poet, Whitman argues, must stand at the site of beginning (ground ready to be cultivated) and end

(ground as resting place for the dead) and foster the perpetuity of vital exchange between them. The poet must not simply be an observer; rather, he must be an active doer, a participant.

Matthiessen reiterates this point when he describes Whitman's poetry as having a unique conviviality that makes it feel real and almost tangible. What enables this realism is Whitman's direct experience with the dead: "... a man cannot use words so unless he has experienced the facts that they express, unless he has grasped them with his senses" (Matthiessen 518).

Whitman's daily interaction with death gave him the authority to deliver "the facts" about dying, as he could provide authentic, immediate, and palpable information that others could not.

Moreover, his relationships with various soldiers revealed to him "the decorum" of dutiful servicemen, who kept good manners, humility about heroism, generosity, and sharpness of mind (Matthiessen 603) – a true reflection of the concept of Good Death. Whitman tried to place the same contented dignity, which he called the "sanity of everything," in his poetry to evidence the correspondence between the world's natural order and the mental, bodily order of soldiers.

In fact, it is this mysterious yet familiar correspondence between man and nature that Whitman hones in on and elaborates in his poetry. Matthiessen argues, "Whitman's greatest act of pioneering was in helping the modern sensibility feel at home in the natural world ... [suggesting] the interdependence of man and nature ... rebirth through fertility" (Matthiessen 622). He is right in the sense that Whitman did help mid-nineteenth-century Americans better understand their relation to nature and fate, but Matthiessen misses a crucial point: Whitman's poetry does not help "modern sensibility" feel at home in the natural world, but rather *with* the natural world, *as* the natural world. He wants readers to realize that they are as much a part of nature as the trees around their house or the crops in their fields – their matter and energy are one and the same. With war descended on American soil and death as imminent to families as it ever

had been, Whitman suggests in his poetry that death is not something to fear or dread. Instead, it is the progressive force that returns life to its essential elements and thus affords new life to spring up. His experience as a volunteer nurse in the Civil War taught him that in poetry there is eternal regeneration, that “the word is become flesh.”⁹

⁹ The quote is Whitman’s personal spin on the renowned phrase from John 1:14 (King James Version).

Chapter 2: Framing Death, Linguistic Applications

Most of Walt Whitman's fragmentary reflections on the Civil War were collected and compiled into a volume that became *Specimen Days*. In a section called "The Real War Will Never Get in the Books" – an opinion Whitman kept and cultivated throughout the postbellum era – he writes, "Of that many-threaded drama, with its sudden and strange surprises, its confounding of prophecies, its moments of despair . . . the untold and unwritten history of the war [is] infinitely greater than the few scraps and distortions that are ever told or written" (*LOA* 779). Whitman struggled to honor his self-appointed responsibility: that of translating the incomprehensible reality of war into something figurative, poetic, and enduring. A major tension actualizes in Whitman's poetry as he comes to terms with the enormous constraints of rendering the "untold and unwritten history of the war" into intelligible, appreciable information.

To begin to address the issue of translation, Whitman developed a system of interconnected symbols that could be deliberately imbued with particular meaning.¹⁰ These symbols recur in his elegies and poetry about death, acting together as the nexus between reality and imagination – the foundational step toward transcribing the facts and properties of death into language.

The first of these symbols is oratory, which stands for voice and dialogue, and it derives from Whitman's fascination with the impassioned speeches of famous orators like Elias Hicks and the God-fearing sermons of ministers like Henry Ward Beecher.¹¹ Whitman was drawn to their natural use of poetic rhythms that reflected the ordinary cadences of public speech and resisted formulaic modes of expression (Matthiessen 556). Moreover, oratory has the power of

¹⁰ F.O. Matthiessen refers to them as Whitman's "trinity of symbols," and analyzes each throughout the chapter.

¹¹ Biographical information drawn from David S. Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America*, specifically the chapter "American Performances: Theater, Oratory, Music."

animation, what Whitman calls a “transaction” – taking the “flaming of the fire” and the “surging crowds of workmen” in America and giving them “definite use and place and meaning.”¹² The key part of this power, and indeed the central function of the symbol of oratory, is the poet’s establishment of intersubjectivity, and the notion that no participant in the poetic exchange stands alone. Kerry Larson reiterates this argument in *Whitman’s Drama of Consensus*: the poet “present[s] himself as the conjunctive medium for the social discourse – the connective link through whose utterance speak ‘the many long dumb voices’ and through whose reach there is offered ‘the pass-key of hearts’” (Larson 58). A process of mediation, then, emerges as the poet must be both intimate and fair to his subjects, giving the “dumb voices” enough space to engage in the “social discourse” that is embodied by oratory. For Whitman, this first symbol represents inclusion and support, helping to vocalize the downcast, weak, and quiet.

The second symbol – music – furthers the aim of reader engagement. In much of Whitman’s poetry, there is a shuttling between the operatic performance styles of recitative and aria, which manifests most clearly in his repeated insertion of small, private bird-songs throughout sections of vast lyrical narrative, as in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” one of his major *Sea-Drift* elegies (Matthiessen 561). Vacillating between the grand and the private in this way allows Whitman to move subtly from generality to the particular in poetic expression, especially as he describes the masses of dying soldiers in alternating broad and specific contexts, effectively commemorating (broad) and also eulogizing (specific) their memory, rendering the enormity of war, like opera, into something private and comprehensible. Another key aspect of music is that it compels the listener to recall or make available a kind of profound emotion. Whitman often structures this same summoning into his poetry: he believes “that the

¹² From the first chapter (“Our Eminent Visitors: Past, Present, and Future”) of Whitman’s extended essay *November Boughs*.

main function of his unfinished lines [is] to call up in his reader a state of creative feeling from which further music might spring” (Matthiessen 563). Often, through his careful use of enjambment and stopped lines, Whitman incorporates a generative aspect into his poetry – language prolongs itself through the exchange between reader and text, as the reader is summoned emotionally to inhabit and then resolve the empty spaces left in the poems. The inclusion of liminal, tenantable spaces in Whitman’s poetry presents an opportunity for the reader to address such incompleteness by becoming a contributor in the imaginative exchange, inserting his or her own verse into the “unfinished lines” and gaps.

But where does the poetry take the reader once he or she has been placed directly in the creative scheme? The sea, which is the third symbol in Whitman’s triad, exemplifies a sense of progression and pilgrimage that helps answer this question. Whitman sees in the sea a poetic “reconciliation of opposites” that is “essential for the creation of any great art” (Matthiessen 566). But Whitman also views the sea as the paradigm of indirection: water molecules colliding and breaking apart, the ebb and flow of waves, the circuitousness of tides. In the concluding poem of *Sea-Drift*¹³ – the same collection that introduces “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” – Whitman portrays the sea as a body that is always in-between places, objects, and states:

Larger and smaller waves in the spread of the ocean
yearnfully flowing,
The wake of the sea-ship after she passes, flashing and
frolicsome under the sun,
A motley procession with many a fleck of foam and many
fragments,
Following the stately and rapid ship, in the wake following.

¹³ “After the Sea-Ship” (*LOA* 402).

Whitman values the sea as a symbol because it represents the prioritization of passage over arrival, the importance of the voyage over the destination. In this concluding section, the waves are depicted as never quite reaching the ship; instead, they are “yearnfully flowing” in the “wake.” The extended use of participles, particularly in the final line with the interlocking of “following,” mimics sustained movement – like waves of the sea, the participles are motioned parts working to create a single unified energy, never quite settling at their destination.

Whitman’s deployment of images of transition and movement through participial use in this section point to a greater argument: one of the central aims of Whitman’s elegiac writing is to couple death with the sea, and this concluding poem – indeed the concluding line (the meaning of “wake” here doubly implied as mourning) – portrays death as a kind of passage-in-progress, and *not*, as it were, a finality or an end point.

Whitman’s triad of symbols – oratory, music, and the sea – cohere to provide the framework for representing death both as intermediate and as it relates to sense in poetry, exemplified by oratory and music’s influence on auditory reception and the sea’s influence on visual, olfactory, and tactile reception. These sensory inputs are processed, analyzed, and interpreted by consciousness, which is central to Whitman’s poetry. He writes in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, “A minute and a drop of me settle my brain;/I believe the soggy clods shall become lovers and lamps,/And a compend of compends is the meat of a man or woman” (*LOA* 56). The passage reveals an indistinct or yet incomplete mind bogged with “soggy clods,” a system of thought that must collect from “minute” and “drop” to “settle” as a distinct entity. Matthiessen calls this poetry of pulling together a “dawning of elemental consciousness” (577). In this context, “dawning” most nearly means coming into being; the futuristic verb tense of “shall” in the poem juxtaposed with the present tense “is” implies a confusion of time. It is

possible, then, to construe “dawning” in particular temporal terms: consciousness is not just coming into being, it is reawakening, coming *back* into being. Such a view is useful for considering death and the nature of consciousness as it pertains to time and place.

What is Whitman’s purpose in imitating the dawning of consciousness? From what poetic necessity does it arise? Cavitch discusses the challenge of redeeming “unidentifiable and unlocatable [Civil War soldier] bodies” as a way to add to “the psychic and the material resources of individuated mourning” (Cavitch 239). Essentially, for many mid-nineteenth-century Americans, mourning remained a non-definitive, indeterminate task because thousands of soldiers were either lost or mutilated beyond identification. The Civil War obliterated not only names but also entire bodies, and without the information of the body, family members lived in uncertain suspense (Faust 128). Whitman intends to show the reawakening of consciousness: to give identity and form to the nameless, faceless dead. He describes this as an “ambition to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form ... aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days” (*LOA* 658).¹⁴ The “unlocatable and unidentifiable” soldiers come back into awareness, which Whitman characterizes as “Personality” being brought into immediacy.

In addition to the dissemination of consciousness, Whitman’s poetry explores the possibility of translating physical and bodily presence into text. Michael Moon, in *Disseminating Whitman*, argues that Whitman’s poetry attempts to “...locate a central place for the body in the practices of writing and reading; the desire somehow to open in the literary text a space in which the actual physical presence of the writer might come into loving contact with readers” (Moon 14). While this argument is certainly valid and advances an important

¹⁴ From “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” which was published later in Whitman’s life as a reflection on the inception and development of *Leaves of Grass* as a cultural project.

understanding of Whitman's poetry, Moon misses a pivotal point: not only does the writer come into contact with the readers, but the deceased soldiers, friends, and family members do as well. Whitman's own beliefs about language evidence this argument of plurality, as he writes that language "is the infinite go-before of the present . . . Language is more like some vast living body, or perennial body of bodies."¹⁵ To approach Whitman's poetry about death, the reader must conceive of language as a "body of bodies" moving always from the distant to the present, the near. For Whitman, poetry must aim to produce the bodily presences of the deceased, so that, when contact is made with the reader, death is proven not to be a final point of separation.

To give this sort of thinking direct application, Whitman invents a linguistic practice that accommodates the nexus-building required for proving the coexistence of life and death. His language must somehow invent nexuses that bridge the gaps between the reader and the page, the living and the dead. Larson begins to articulate the nature of Whitman's linguistic model: "...language affords too 'luxuriant' a 'growth' to be tethered to a closed network of signs. It is an evolving organism or 'living structure' where 'words are not built in, but stand loose, and ready to go this way or that'" (Larson 83). Whitman's new practice returns this analysis to the idea of poetry, and representations of death, being in a state of passage and free association. In his view, language must be regarded as structurally unconditional; it consists of open networks of meanings, monuments, highways, and bonds. Such focused discussion about space and proximity, about language being capable of managing distinct forums of bodily presence, raises questions about boundary. Where do these spaces originate? What do their beginnings and ends

¹⁵ Whitman articulates several of his own theories about language in a *November Boughs* chapter called "Slang in America," in which he argues that language arises from the habits, work, desires, and necessity of every man.

consist of? With poetry of embodiment and contact, how does Whitman linguistically address notions of death being one of these ends?

Whitman develops what Larson calls a pure process of poetry that inaugurates discourse *without* beginning or end (Larson 97-98). In the Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman links this pure process to time: “In the talk on the soul and eternity and God off of his equal plane [the poet] is silent. He sees eternity less like a play with a prologue and denouement . . . he sees eternity in men and women” (LOA 9). The “talk” of social discourse and poetry is without “prologue” and “denouement” – it has neither beginning nor end. Sometimes, however, blockages in the pure process occur, and these are moments when beginning and end get compressed together, as happens in life (and often symbolized in poetry) when infants are taken too soon from their mothers, for example, or sprouts are stunted before they can grow fully. In this way, death becomes not an end but simply a blockage, affording the coexistence of beginning and end into what can be thought of as a kind of afterlife.

The task now remains to determine how Whitman’s pure process manifests in his elegiac writing. He is particularly interested in the “pollution of the Earth,” and how it can “feed off” the rank materials of deceased bodies without being marred or disgraced by them (Larson 180). He articulates these anxieties in “This Compost”: “O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?/How can you be alive you growths of spring?/How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots/orchards, grain?/Are they continually putting distemper’d corpses within you?” (LOA 495). Whitman’s elegiac writing illuminates an exchange between three principle actors – human bodies, nature, and death. His poetry attempts to show that death translates human bodies into nature by returning them to their organic elements.

Chapter 3: Indirection, Arrangement, Disarrangement, and the Task of Self-Diffusion

Whitman's poetic trope of indirection – deviation in language or action that is productive, fruitful, begetting of insight – extends from the initial 1855 Preface of *Leaves of Grass* to one of his final essays, “Democratic Vistas,” in which he reflects on American politics and art.¹⁶ In Whitman's poetry, indirection refers to a specific aesthetic phenomenon: proper direction can only be ascertained through deviation (the idea that venturing down several wrong paths will eventually illuminate the right one). He believes that much of American invention and optimism emerges from this kind of diversionary, meandering, indirect exploration, and he argues, “[there are] an infinite number of currents and forces, and contributions, and temperatures, and cross purposes, whose ceaseless play of counterpart upon counterpart brings constant restoration and vitality” (*LOA* 929). For Whitman, vitality derives from the ongoing brush of “cross purposes,” which can be construed like friction that creates a spark from the rubbing of unique energies. The latter part of the passage speaks also to a feature of Whitman's poetry that pervades most of his mature elegiac writing: the interaction of “counterpart upon counterpart,” the movement of several parts toward a whole, and the breaking down of a whole into “currents and forces, and contributions, and temperatures” and other parts.

Whitman looks at the masses of laborers, artists, families, and in the Civil War, soldiers, in America and perceives a dialectic between the varied individuals and the broad collective they create. There is a “law of perfection in masses and floods ... that its finish is to each for itself and onward from itself ... that it is profuse and impartial ... one part does not need to be thrust above another” (*LOA* 12). Whitman holds, both in his political and poetic understanding, that each part plays a role for itself, and more than that, it extends “onward from itself” in a way that

¹⁶ “For such is the expression of the American poet it to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic” (*LOA* 8).

is often unpredictable or new. This argument figures into Whitman's frequent dealing with matters of the body and soul, in which the body represents distinct parts and the soul characterizes a greater totality. He writes:

Not a move can a man or woman make that affects him or her in a day or a month or any part of the direct lifetime or the hour of death but the same affects him or her onward afterward through the indirect lifetime ... The spirit receives from the body just as much as it gives to the body. Not one name of word or deed ... ever is or ever can be stamped on the programme but it is duly realized and returned (*LOA* 21).¹⁷

What is the "indirect lifetime" here named by Whitman? Not the "direct lifetime" of deliberateness and intention, and not "the hour of death." The "indirect lifetime" exists independently of these and seems to sustain its own sort of existence. The "indirect lifetime" is, in this way, what enables the "move" (action, motive, thought) of a man or woman to have consequence and effect that survives beyond them and lives "onward afterward" in a separate course. Like debris from a wrecked ship (a frequent image in his elegies) that floats along the shore until it is seen or picked up by a stranger, the "word or deed" of an individual remains in its own "indirect lifetime" until it can be "realized and returned" to form. Though in Whitman's poetry indirection necessarily means diversion or digression, it is essential to note that there is this second aspect to the definition, suggesting the whole that has been broken down into parts must undergo recomposition. Among Whitman's three mature elegies, "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" takes up these notions of indirection, arrangement, and disarrangement most

¹⁷ For some additional context, this section falls in the middle of an extended polemic against inaction. Whitman encourages people, and especially poets, to act always, even at the risk of doing something poorly, because it helps create lasting identity and inspiration. He emphasizes cause and effect, arguing that no action "live[s] only in its moment." He continues, "... no result exists now without being from its long antecedent result, and that from its antecedent, and so backward without the farthest mentionable spot coming a bit nearer..." (*LOA* 23).

intensely.¹⁸ The poem attempts to show that “the hour of death” does not abolish the body or the soul, and also that this process of repositioning parts is largely participatory, requiring a joint effort between the speaker and reader to resolve the indirect lifetime posed in the poem. “As I Ebb’d” places Whitman on the shore by the sea, “musing late in the autumn day” on the “voices of men and women” and the sight of miscellaneous rubble “left by the tide.”¹⁹ Initially, the poem presents Whitman as an all-absorbing observer, who uses his sense to comprehend the disparate moving parts around him. But this notion is thrown into disarray when Whitman suddenly expresses, or confesses to, feelings of despair: “O baffled, balk’d, bent to the very earth / Oppress’d with myself that I have dared to open my mouth.” What may seem like an overt statement of self-disappointment is actually a subtle confusion of syntax. “Oppress” is a transitive verb, and Whitman makes its object difficult to pinpoint. The subtlety of the “with” suggests that there are in fact two separate selves, or objects, at play – “myself” and “I.” But it is less productive to sift through subject-object relationships in this passage than it is to recognize that Whitman is effectively breaking apart and then conflating different versions of himself.

Such disarrangement of the self is another example of the way in which Whitman disseminates his physical presence through the text; however, in this poem, he does so toward a very specific end. Michael Moon theorizes, “...the figure of Whitman’s apostrophe seems to subdue time, space, and the identities of other persons to his own extensible identity; standing at the center of the universe the poems bring into being, the poet diffuses himself until the center is everywhere” (Moon 2). Whitman divides himself in order to create several discrete selves that

¹⁸ For the purposes of this thesis, “mature” distinguishes complex, highly metaphoric writing from the more popular and colloquial writing in poems like “O Captain, My Captain!” Moreover, the three elegies I am analyzing share unique thematic resonances between them that make their meanings cohere in a way that Whitman’s other elegies do not.

¹⁹ To prevent confusion, especially as scholarly arguments are introduced throughout this chapter, I will refrain from citing line and page numbers when quoting from the poem.

become the “center[s]” wherever they are. It is a strong poetic maneuver because the more Whitman displaces himself, the more space he can occupy. This diffusion also reads like an intentional step toward achieving greater self-awareness: “But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch’d, untold, altogether unreach’d / Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory sings and bows.” Whitman describes a “real Me” that essentially oversees and holds in check all the mechanisms of poetic diffusion – the self of Whitman that is separate from the one writing the poem, a separate center of awareness and consciousness that pushes back against the poet. The “real Me” is “untouch’d” and “untold,” dwelling in a place “withdrawn far.” The difference between direct and indirect lifetimes manifests here: the direction of the poem, maintained carefully by the poet, is held in check and resisted by the indirect voice of a separate self far withdrawn.

In addition to the transport of the self, the poem depicts the shore and ocean as places of transmission for other entities and forces as well. In his book *Whitman’s Presence*, Tenney Nathanson argues that the ocean, which is either mournful or vengeful in “As I Ebb’d,” “has cast up an icon of the poet as a fragmentary piece of *natura naturata*, desiccated by its separation from this enigmatic source and left among kindred, equally fragmented forms” (Nathanson 446). Nathanson articulates a valuable point about the ocean’s role in the poem, as it is able to conjure or produce things from an “enigmatic source.” However, he misnames the object that is “cast up” – it is not an emblem of the poet, but rather some other mysterious force. Whitman describes the ocean as “the fierce old mother” that “endlessly cries for her castaways.” Moreover, he explains how, along the shore, he is seized by “the spirit that trails in the lines underfoot,” having emerged from the sea. What are these lines underfoot? What kind of spirit from the sea has gripped Whitman? The answer, in part, can be found in another poem of

Whitman's called "To Think of Time," which also poeticizes the arrangement of selves, materials, and debris.²⁰ He writes, "Slow-moving and black lines creep over the whole earth—they never cease—they are burial lines" (*LOA* 552). The shore in "As I Ebb'd," marked with these burial lines that are "underfoot," becomes a site of death. The spirit, then, that seizes Whitman is perhaps the "fierce old mother" who is trying retrieve her lost, dead, or stolen castaways. In other words, it is the force of death that finds him on the shore. And it is in this moment when "As I Ebb'd" becomes profoundly elegiac.

Having diverted readers to another poem, and thus having established the presence of death indirectly, Whitman introduces an interesting turn: amid these moving parts and their interaction with the spirit of death, he acknowledges that he does not have the ability to manage the project of recompositioning the disarranged selves and debris on the shore. He pleads with the sea, "Rustle not up so hoarse and angry against my feet as I touch you or gather from you. / I mean tenderly by you and all, / I gather for myself and for this phantom looking down where we lead, and following me and mine." Whitman feels compelled to provide a reason for why he is visiting the sea (he does this likely out of self-defense against its "angry" ebb and flow), and he admits to "gather[ing]" and "arranging" for a particular "phantom" that follows him. He nods to the ultimate power of the sea, and especially to the spirit of death borne in the burial lines underfoot. This is obviated in another key poetic turn, where Whitman groups *himself* among the debris floating on the shore: "We, capricious, brought hither we know not whence, spread out

²⁰ "To think the thought of death merged in the thought of materials" – the poem, more generally, describes particular scenes in America and meditates on how time and death change the way we sift through memory. The concluding lines of the poem are important for their candor and demonstration of Whitman's firm belief in the power of the soul to live on after death: "I swear I think now that every thing without exception has an eternal soul! ... I swear I think there is nothing but immortality!" (*LOA* 557)

before you.” Whitman the gatherer, the rearranger, confesses that he is “capricious,” or subject to change and irregularity, and that he has lost control of the recompositioning process.

This turn is prefigured by a crucial moment in the poem when the poet throws himself upon the land – personified as the “father” – and clings there so that he cannot be “unloose[d].” He concedes, “I too am but a trail of drift and debris, / I too leave little wrecks upon you, you fish-shaped island ... I hold you so firm till you answer me something.” The question here extends beyond whether Whitman renders himself into drift and debris, and asks, alternatively, for what purpose does he fashion himself into parts? Is the tone of this passage imbued more with uncertainty or resignation? Michael Moon argues that Whitman “directly challenges the figure of the father not by attacking him hostilely but by ‘throwing himself’ upon the father’s breast and refusing to ‘unloose’ him until the father answers his question” (Moon 149). Moon’s reading seems to be teasing out a kind of uncertainty and insecurity, but it does not capture the full emotional range of what is at stake. Whitman can be neither challenging the land, nor can he be looking for the father to answer his question: no question has been asked at this point, not in the lines preceding this moment and not in the lines following. Instead, Whitman asks the father to “touch” and “breathe to” him, evidencing a desire not to be given verbal support in the form of an answer, but rather physical and sensual support. In this context, to “answer” here must mean something tangible like to mold or shape, and it becomes clear that the poet is not seeking an answer – he wants to be *shaped into* an answer. The poet throws himself on the shore so that he can, essentially, be picked up by someone else, who, like him, wanders the shore and searches for debris.

So who becomes the addressee of Whitman’s surrender? He provides a partial clue in the concluding lines of the poem, turning his attention to “You up there walking or sitting, /

Whoever you are, we too lie in drifts at your feet.” While this is not the only second-person reference in the poem, it is the first one to announce an unknown “you,” who is not the poet, the “real Me,” or the ocean. Moon suggests that this invocation, among others in the poem, “is designed to impel readers to rediscover and reclaim their own ‘real bodies,’ first in the text and them in themselves . . . without being impeded by the kinds of terminal horizons to which human bodies are subject, for example, illness or death” (Moon 131). The second part of Moon’s argument is certainly correct, as this arrangement and disarrangement of debris and selves is a way to resist the “terminal horizons to which human bodies are subject.” However, taking into account the true meaning of “answer” and realizing that Whitman’s laying down of parts is entirely self-directed, the first part of Moon’s argument seems insufficient. The implication here is that Whitman is addressing the reader, who is now deemed responsible for taking up the project of repositioning, arranging, and disarranging – Whitman is not, in other words, summoning them to “reclaim” themselves. These concluding lines are an exact reflection of the moment in which Whitman throws himself upon the “father” land; he now performs the same action, and asks the reader to shape him, his selves, and this debris into something whole.

In his study *The Roots of Romanticism*, Isaiah Berlin analyzes this type of exchange between poet and reader. He claims that a true work of art is the expression of somebody, a voice speaking, one man addressing himself to other men (Berlin 69). His argument is particularly relevant to Whitmanian elegiac writing distinguished in its exceedingly earnest addresses to readers, who are repeatedly asked to partake in the process engaged by the poem. Frequently in his three mature elegies, Whitman disarranges himself and disappears among the subjects to become “a voice speaking” from the very place he wants readers to go. “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” introduces the means – indirection, arrangement and disarrangement of

parts – with which he does this, and his two other elegies, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” will develop them into a more complete poetic strategy.

Chapter 4: Death in Translation

In 1876, more than a decade after the initial publication of his major Civil War elegies, Whitman published a two-volume Centennial Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which included a number of revisions and commentaries about the composition of the work. He devised a special Preface for the new edition and wrote about his evolving intentions for *Leaves of Grass*, both as a feat of artistic achievement and as a force in American political and social life. What is most notable – and unusual, too – about the Preface is Whitman’s extensive deployment of footnotes that read like revisions to other revisions, often taking the shape of multi-page subtexts. In the Preface’s first footnote, he provides perhaps his clearest and, for the purposes of this thesis, most useful articulation of death’s centrality in *Leaves of Grass*: “I meant . . . [to enter] the sphere of the resistless gravitation of spiritual law, and with cheerful face [estimate] death, not at all as the cessation, but as somehow what I feel it must be, the entrance upon by far the greatest part of existence, and something that life is at least as much for, as it is for itself” (LOA 1006).

Whitman understands death not to be a “cessation” from the living, but instead a different “part of existence” that life, in fact, provides for and helps complete. This passage describes an active exchange between life and death as two distinct “part[s] of existence,” and, by entering “the sphere of resistless gravitation,” Whitman stands in translation at the center.

To relate this argument specifically to poetic practice, a comparative consideration of Whitman’s mature elegies must be made.²¹ While the speaker in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” diffuses into the separate realms of life and death, addressing themes of indirection and disarrangement as strategies for such diffusion, the speaker in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” *connects* the realms of life and death and bridges the gap that would otherwise remain

²¹ For an explanation about the use of the word “mature” here, refer to footnote 18.

vexed or strained. “Out of the Cradle” depicts this task of connection as a unique kind of translation: Whitman effectively becomes a transmitter who receives the dead’s “thousand responsive songs at random” and transcribes them as “death’s carols” for the living. He positions himself as the nexus through which the voices, thoughts, anxieties, and hopes of the dead pass, and he broadcasts them as intelligible messages and songs for the living. In this way, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” shows Whitman entering “the sphere of resistless gravitation” – the place of the soul – to decipher and make readily available the communication between the living and the dead.

On a broad level, the poem contextualizes the rituals of mourning and gives them special credence in the form of birdsong. Whitman, the speaker, offers an account of his experience observing a family of mocking-birds who are tragically impacted by the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of the mother bird, the she-bird. Whitman details the emotional impact that the she-bird’s loss left on him as well, and does so by developing a translation of the he-bird’s pained and mournful songs about her assumed death. On a more specific level, “Out of the Cradle” explores mourning and the dilemma of realization it creates, establishing the family of mocking-birds as an intimate example of how difficult the process of grieving can be when no material information is left about the deceased. To further illustrate this difficulty, Whitman traces the desperation of the he-bird in his search for his missing mate and provides a careful rendering of the bird’s tragic song as he looks to the sea (“What is that little black thing I see there in the white?”), the sky (“Low-hanging moon! / What is that dusky spot in your brown yellow?”), and the land (“Land! Land! O land! / Whichever way I turn, O I think you could give me my mate back again if you only would”) (*LOA* 390-391). By portraying the mournful confusion of the bird in such a way that places the bird’s focus on *itself* as a lost soul, Whitman

identifies a crucial aspect of mourning: either the mourner, in this case the he-bird, expresses confusion about the location of the departed mate in relation to him or he expresses confusion about *his own* location in relation to it. In other words, mourning in “Out of the Cradle” raises an interesting dilemma of realization, as the question of exactly who is lost remains largely unresolved.

The dilemma of realization stems from the he-bird’s relative isolation from other birds or beings that could support him and help alleviate the symptoms of mourning. The absence of any sort of formal memorialization prevents the he-bird from receiving “ritual affirmation” in which a community would share in the loss and mark the status of each new mourner, deprived of a family member (Faust 153). Because the he-bird is the sole mourner in “Out of the Cradle,” he has no way to secure “affirmation” and certainty about his deceased mate, and he struggles to draw meaning from or assign it to the loss of the she-bird. This is the point at which Whitman’s role as speaker and translator becomes apparent. He seeks “not only to recuperate some image, semblance, or sensation of what has been lost but also to restore the ambivalent mourner to a world of shared meanings in which the value of particular losses would be stable and readily apparent” (Cavitch 111). The key aim of mourning, especially in Whitman’s elegies, is to create a network of “shared meanings” that are free and accessible. Since the he-bird is kept from obtaining these meanings on his own, Whitman, by translating the bird’s song, creates the association of shared meanings described by Cavitch and essentially delivers the meaning to the he-bird. The poet describes himself as “I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing [the mocking-birds] / Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating.” The verbs here take the form of participles without direct objects – they are not attached to any one particular meaning, but rather, their intransitive usage leaves open an infinite range of meaning and value that the reader

is free to decipher. Moreover, Whitman makes a pivotal distinction about his role just before he provides an extended part of the he-bird's song: "I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair, / Listen'd long and long. / Listen'd to keep, to sing, now translating the notes, / Following you my brother." Whitman argues that he is listening "to keep" – a verb again used intransitively – which shows that he is retaining and perpetuating the mournful song of the he-bird within himself.

The idea of the body or soul as being an archive of things is especially helpful for thinking about Whitman's effort to translate death in "Out of the Cradle." Drew Gilpin Faust writes about the ability of identity to survive beyond death, and argues that the body is "the repository of human identity in two senses: it represent[s] the intrinsic selfhood and individuality of a particular human, and at the same time it incarnate[s] the very humanness of that identity—the promise of eternal life..." (Faust 62). What is unclear in Faust's analysis – and what must be made clear now – is the notion that a body (a person) can be a "repository" not just of his or her own identity but the identity of others as well. A body can collect, absorb, and preserve parts of other identities and give them incarnate form. Whitman tries to prove this in the first stanza of "Out of the Cradle," where he lists a number of thoughts, feelings, and observations in order to mimic the outpouring of an identity that is not his own. It takes nineteen lines – fifteen of which begin with prepositions, creating a sense of movement from one place to another – to get to the subject that is receiving each of these assorted pieces of identity: Whitman. He writes at the end of the stanza, "I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter, / Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them, / A reminiscence sing." In this way, Whitman reveals himself to be the receiver and retainer of these stray images – they cohere and find stability in him and the "reminiscence" he sings.

The poem's first stanza opens up the possibility of what Isaiah Berlin calls *sehnsucht*, an attempt either to absorb the infinite into oneself or to dissolve oneself into it (Berlin 121). This process is, in fact, a very prominent theme in Whitman's elegies, as the problem of mourning itself is a negotiation between the self and the infinite realm of death. Berlin's concept maps easily onto the scheme of Whitman's mature elegies: "As I Ebb'd" explores the notion of the self dissolving into the infinite, whereas "Out of the Cradle" explores the notion of the infinite being absorbed by and drawn into the self. Whitman writes in "Out of the Cradle":

Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,
 Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
 Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what there in the night,
 By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,
 The messenger there arous'd, the fire, the sweet hell within,
 The unknown want, the destiny of me.

Whitman confesses that he will never "escape" the "cries of unsatisfied love" that emanate from those souls taken before they could fulfill their love – it is the "destiny of [him]" to receive and absorb the infinite "unknown want" of the deceased. Though he admits to being overwhelmed, he finds himself invigorated by this process of absorption and accepts it as his duty: "O if I am to have so much, let me have more!" He establishes himself in this passage as the repository of human identity, particularly for the dead.

Since Whitman suggests that he is capable of keeping the identities of the dead within him, how does he make them intelligible in his translation? How can he render the songs of the dead interpretable and meaningful for the living? Much of "Out of the Cradle" is an experiment with sensory perception, and Whitman attempts to link death explicitly to sense. His reason for doing so is, in part, explained by Faust, who argues that the circumstances of the Civil War – a lack of forensic equipment, poor documentation and reporting – inhibited mourning, prevented people from moving through the stages of grief, and made "survivors ... literally and figuratively

unable to ‘see clearly what ... has been lost’” (Faust 144). Whitman’s solution to this uncertainty, at least in terms of his poetry, is to provide as many sensory details as possible to enable realization. As Whitman writes in “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” “... the true use for the imaginative faculty of modern times is to give ultimate vivification to facts ... and to common lives Without that ultimate vivification ... reality would seem incomplete ... and life itself, finally in vain” (*LOA* 659). If readers are given vivified facts and details about sense, then they can imagine or realize the particulars of a deceased one’s reality, feel that it was not “in vain,” and thus move through the stages of grief. He emphasizes this point in “Out of the Cradle,” where he writes about a “word final, superior to all” that is “the low and delicious word death, / Hissing melodious.” Whitman’s aim in characterizing death as “low and delicious” is two-fold: to claim that death *is* knowable because it can be, among other things, heard and smelled, and to demonstrate that the memory (identity) of the deceased is indeed tangible, and therefore easier to keep within the repository of the body or soul.

Each of these poetic aims – the establishment of ritual affirmation in mourning, the absorbing and retaining of identity, and the linking of death to sense – seem to point toward a greater ambition in “Out of the Cradle.” Kerry Larson provides the groundwork for analyzing this ambition, as he writes that Whitman frequently “... moves beyond a longing for referential stability to a vision of rhetoric so pure of interest as to be drained of any referential function whatever” (Larson 91). The phrase “pure of interest” is especially interesting because Whitman performs a key poetic turn toward the end of the poem that supports such purity. Following his translation of the he-bird’s song of mourning, Whitman writes that he fuses the “song of my dusky demon and brother” with the “thousand responsive songs at random” and also the poet’s “own songs awaked from that hour.” The mourner, the voices of the dead, and the poet himself

are fused together – a deliberate effort on Whitman’s part to drain “any referential function whatever” from the poetry by inserting himself among the dead and placing himself right in the midst of communication. With this consideration in mind, the central lines of the poem resonate sharply: “For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding to me / So faint, I must be still, be still to listen, / But not altogether still, for then she might not come immediately to me.”

These lines echo what Whitman wrote about entering “the sphere of resistless gravitation,” the place of the dead, as the he-bird and Whitman, fused together, attempt to inhabit a “still” existence. To put it simply, Whitman imagines himself entering a state of death, like the he-bird does, as a way to gain cognition of where and in what shape the dead might be.

How does Whitman’s imaginative effort manifest in other places throughout the poem? He names his task of translating the songs of the dead toward the poem’s conclusion, but there is a key moment earlier in its development. He argues that the word death is “like some old crone rocking the cradle,” a phrase from which the poem’s title is derived. More importantly, however, in the poem, the only thing that resembles a cradle in its true sense – as an incubator of life, a resting place for the young – is the mocking-birds’ nest. Whitman initially describes the birds as “Two feather’d guests from Alabama, two together, / And their nest, and four light-green eggs spotted with brown.” While the nest and eggs are not mentioned again in the poem, it is essential to note them here as two of the first things associated with the birds. Taking into consideration again the opening stanza of the poem, in which the first line “Out of the cradle endlessly rocking” is paired with the subject “I,” who is Whitman as the speaker, a fascinating reading emerges: Whitman himself is out of the cradle endlessly rocking – he likens himself to one of the eggs that has either been left in or fallen out of the cradle that is the birds’ nest, endlessly rocked by the “old crone” of death. Whitman knows how to translate the songs and

“meanings which [he] of all men know[s]” when he counts himself there among the death-affected birds. This poetic maneuver puts him in an ideal position for “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” where he adds a final dimension to his role by suggesting that he can reunite the living with the dead in a literary afterlife.

Chapter 5: Constructing a Literary Representation of the Afterlife

Whitman's highly particular vision of himself as a transmitter of songs and souls manifests as much in his elegies as it does in his greater body of work. His numerous collections – among them *Calamus*, *Sea-Drift*, and *Drum-Taps* – stitch together a portrait of death and dying that refuses to recognize any sentiment of departure or separation. His resistance to more conventional perceptions of death is illustrated best by the consistency with which he extends ideas about contact beyond the boundary of death. In “Scented Herbage of My Breast,” Whitman adds to the logic he advances in “As I Ebb'd” and “Out of the Cradle,” where he describes himself as inhabiting the place of the soul to foster communication and contact between the living and the dead. He finds himself in “Scented Herbage” ruminating over the similarities between life and death, and declares, “I will say what I have to say by itself, / I will sound myself and comrades only, I will never again utter a call only their call, / I will raise with it immortal reverberations through the States” (*LOA* 269). After linking himself inextricably to his “comrades” – the departed Civil War souls – in “As I Ebb'd” and “Out of the Cradle,” Whitman here emphasizes that his effort reaches toward the “immortal,” toward the same imperishability of companionship where to “sound” and “utter” the call of others is to recast their body and presence.

With “Song of the Answerer,” one of the longer poems from *Calamus*, Whitman continues to augment his theory about death being a mere threshold one crosses to achieve immortality. Although the poem is not an elegy, it offers a clear elaboration of the power that words have to restore life into “poems, religions, politics, war, peace, behavior, histories, [and] essays.” Whitman argues, “words of the true poems” actually help “prepare for death, yet they are not the finish, but rather the outset, / They bring none to his or her terminus or to be content

and full, / Whom they take they take into space to behold the birth of stars, to learn one of the meanings” (*LOA* 318). He intends for his elegies to be “true poems” that show death not to be “the finish, but rather the outset.” More importantly, his elegies try to recreate, or at least represent, a “birth” beyond the “terminus” of death. “Scented Herbage” and “Song of the Answerer,” like much of Whitman’s writing about death, typify the ideas and expressions found in his more hermetic treatments of passing, mourning, and memorialization. None are more hermetic than his elegy for Abraham Lincoln, a poem that stands as the artistic and aesthetic pinnacle of his meditations about death: “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.”

“Lilacs” combines several of Whitman’s beliefs about life, death, and questions of eternity, and it centers them each around three central story lines: a “hidden bird” warbling its song from “the swamp in secluded recesses,” a “great star” and orb sailing across the sky, and a sprig of lilac as it travels with Lincoln’s funeral procession. Whitman imbues these three symbols – “lilac and star and bird” – with distinct eternal qualities throughout the poem. Moreover, as he narrates the special entwining of these symbols, he does so with the aim to construct a literary representation of the afterlife and to demonstrate consummately that death cannot be and is not a final parting.

Whitman revered Lincoln as the ultimate embodiment of the American democratic experiment, and he was deeply moved by Lincoln’s assassination. He reflects on the event in *November Boughs*: “And as I dwell on what I myself heard or saw of the mighty Westerner, and blend it with the history and literature of my age, and of what I can get of all ages, and conclude it with his death, it seems like some tragic play, superior to all else I know” (*LOA* 1196). Whitman characterizes Lincoln as a “Westerner” whose life has been made into a “play, superior to all” because it replicated the confusion, conflict, complexity, rising action, and denouement of

an archetypal tragic play. Of course, the key feature of a tragic story involves a choice the hero makes that *could* prevent the tragedy from happening but instead sets the tragedy in motion – in this case, Lincoln’s choice to attend the play. Whitman seems to have in mind this *November Boughs* notion of Lincoln as hero in a tragic play because he fashions “Lilacs” to be a kind of play itself, composed of sixteen sections that function like scenes, movements, soliloquies, and vignettes. In this poem, Whitman confronts the devastating loss of national leadership at a critical transitional moment, and he attempts to imagine a renewed, healthy, an imaginative project that Isaiah Berlin describes as “the intimate binding together of the entire physical and spiritual needs of a nation . . . of its entire internal and external life, into a great energetic, infinitely active and living whole” (Berlin 144). Of course, for Whitman, the project of imagining an “infinitely active and living whole” is both poetic and political.

The first two sections of “Lilacs” deal exclusively with an image of Lincoln as a “drooping star in the west” – a “powerful western fallen star.” By likening him to a fallen star, Whitman depicts Lincoln as a bright celestial body that “droops” or appears to set in the western sky each night, resembling the image of the fallen hero. However, Whitman also notes that the star returns in the sky every night, which establishes a symbolic linkage between death and renewal. The unusual frequency of internal rhyme in the first two stanzas – “lilacs”/“last,” “bloom’d”/“droop’d,” “sky”/“night,” “spring”/“bring” – turns the focus inward, as Whitman seems to be reassuring readers that their circumstances are secure and contained within a carefully structured framework, like the lines and stanzas of the poem. The other implication of the internal rhyme suggests that the section functions like an echo chamber, a coffin perhaps, invoking a sense that Whitman and his readers are converging now within a particular space. His repeated use of “O” in section 2 supports this idea of enclosure, as the letter’s symbolic

significance is four-fold: it simultaneously represents the enclosed nature of a coffin as well as a gateway or a boundary to be passed through, its perfect circularity represents the coexistence of beginning and end in a single form, and it stands in as the shape of the sailing star or orb.

However, in section 5, Whitman uses the image of a funeral procession to brilliantly counteract or chasten the symbolism and abstraction of the first two sections by refocusing the reader's attention from the star to the ground – from the far and abstract to the near and concrete.

Whitman is among the “silent sea of faces” and the “thousand voices” that watch the “coffin that slowly passes.” Onlookers gather near “the waiting depot” with “somber faces” and sing “dirges through the night.” Whitman's juxtaposing of abstraction in the first sections and meticulous concrete detail in sections 5 and 6 contributes directly to his hope for representing the afterlife: he wants to show that the abstracted place beyond death is actually an eternal reunion with loved ones, that it is familiar and near at hand.

In his depiction of the funeral march in section 6, Whitman uses repetition and plays with verb tense to heighten the reader's sense of closeness to the event. Eight lines stake “With” as the first word, which implies a grouping together of people, sights, and thoughts around the “pomp of the inloop'd flags.” In other words, there is a singular unity and connectedness about the ceremony. Similarly, in section 5, Whitman begins two lines with “Amid” and punctuates them with several active participles: “passing,” “darkening,” “standing,” “waiting,” “rising,” “shuddering” all appear in the span of seven lines to deliver the reader to the present and into the moment he is creating. Shirley Samuels argues that this process is performed to establish the *point d'appui*, “the quilting that draws together layers of possible memory as it pierces them” (Samuels 76). Essentially, Whitman is stitching together stray images as a way to recreate or establish “memory” and through it imagine the feeling of pain in mourning. He is pursuing the

idea of the poem as an ambiguous space that can be entered (pierced) and explored. When Max Cavitch writes in *American Elegy* that Sallie A. Brock's anthologized elegies in *The Southern Amaranth* "are not *like* the remains of the dead; they *are* the remains" (Cavitch 30), he is reacting to a similar poetic curation of sorts that is deployed by Whitman. Whereas Brock's anthology selects and preserves the "remains of the dead" as a kind of symbolic cemetery, Whitman's poem "Lilacs" selects and preserves the memories and identities of the dead in ceremonial celebration of their retrieval. They are, as Whitman famously writes near the end of the poem, "retrievements out of the night."

Often, to further embed the reader in the process of engaging with the memories and identities of the dead, Whitman offers keen sensory experiences. For example, the opening lines of section 10 address the poem's three symbols (lilac, star, and bird) strictly with respect to the senses they correspond to and fulfill. Whitman writes, "O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved? / And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone? / And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love?" In this passage, sound ("warble myself"), taste ("large sweet soul"), and smell ("my perfume") are confused in a series of questions, as Whitman seems to think that a body can be warbled and a soul or song can be sweet or somehow tasted. Shirley Samuels contends that Whitman's supposed synesthesia "arouses an ambiguous inhabiting of sense impressions as well as possibly announcing the chance to cross other boundaries" (Samuels 105). Samuels's point is correct in its assumption that the conflation of sounds, smells, and sights has the powerful effect of allowing the reader to inhabit "sense impressions," and furthermore, the boundary crossing she describes is, in fact, Whitman's main objective: to create, once again through memory and sense, a way to imagine a place beyond the boundary of death.

He achieves this objective primarily through his handling of the lilac, which is first introduced in section 3. The “lilac-bush tall-growing” emanates with the smell of the same “perfume strong” that Whitman refers to in section 10, and it compels him to perform the imperative work of removing one of the bush’s sprigs – “A sprig with its flower I break.” The sprig of lilac becomes the poem’s central object, the symbol through which the poem eventually builds its representation of an afterlife (and acquires its namesake). Max Cavitch argues for the long-held critical interpretation that Whitman’s breaking of the sprig is a “castrative” gesture figuring “the mourner’s effort to recover a lost sexual power” (Cavitch 131). Cavitch shares the opinion of many scholars, and although it is important to acknowledge the potential sexual suppression at play, there is very little evidence in the section of the poem that would support such a claim – the closest Whitman comes to sexual innuendo is when he describes the leaves as “heart-shaped.” This popular reading of the gesture avoids the poem’s main source of power and intent: its fecundity. There is, contrary to what Cavitch and many other critics argue, a greater scheme at work that seeks to join together Whitman’s generative effort to evoke and create a sense of place with his larger plan to represent a literary afterlife.

Whitman’s breaking of the lilac sprig – both in motive and action – closely resembles the act of Aeneas’s breaking of the golden bough in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, part of the “history and literature ... of all ages” that Whitman refers to in *November Boughs* in relation to Lincoln’s death.²² Aeneas, the Trojan War hero who also appears in Homer’s *Iliad*, is charged by the Fates to essentially found and establish the city of Rome, and to accomplish this, he must complete several tasks. In Book 6, he learns from Sibyl, a Greek priestess, that his new “task,” “labor,”

²² My source material is *Vergil’s Aeneid* (2009) edited by Barbara Weiden Boyd. I also use Stanley Lombardo’s 2005 English translation. For more complete bibliographic information, refer to the Works Consulted page.

and “sacred mission” is to pluck a branch from a bush “blossoming” with “leaf and pliant branch” (Lombardo 134-135). This is uniquely similar to Whitman’s lilac-bush with its “many a pointed blossom rising” and “delicate-color’d blossoms.” Sibyl tells Aeneas that he must pluck the branch with his hand and in its stead will grow “leafs out in gold.” The Latin for this phrase – *auricomōs fētūs* – literally translates to “golden-tressed offspring.” The implication of there being “offspring” from this act of breaking the branch is enormously important because Whitman himself suggests that the lilac-bush is also capable of producing the miracle of life: “With every leaf a miracle.” Moreover, aside from mentioning the green lilac stems, Whitman does not specify the color of the bush or the leaves, which opens the possibility that the lilac flower may indeed be the same gold as Aeneas’s bough. By equating these two scenes, a direct and rather astounding parallel emerges: Aeneas’s founding of Rome is matched by Whitman’s founding of a different kind of place – an afterlife. Aeneas’s act of nation-building is, in effect, performed also by Whitman. In section 6 of “Lilacs,” Whitman approaches the coffin and says, “I give you my sprig of lilac,” which passes the task of founding the new world to the proceeding, journeying mourners – it is the passing of “countless torches lit” from the living to the dead. Whitman reiterates his passing of the task in section 7 when he rushes with “loaded arms” full of sprigs and hands them to “sacred death.” He is looking to obtain a union of life, symbolized by the lilac, and death, a union that can only come to be with the symbolic sort of nation-building posed by the *Aeneid* parallel – Whitman’s founding or constructing an afterlife.

His effort to poeticize this union, and indeed his efforts across each of the major elegies, culminates with section 14 of “Lilacs.” As he sits and contemplates the “many-moving sea-tides” and the “arching heavens” and “infinite separate houses,” Whitman is struck by the appearance of “the cloud ... the long black trail” that also confronts him in “As I Ebb’d.”

Similarly, Whitman is listening for the “gray-brown bird” that sings its “carol of death” – the same hermit-thrush bird that sings to him in “Out of the Cradle.” Both major elegies converge in section 14 of “Lilacs,” and the three poems reach their apex of expression about death in the third stanza:

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
 And the thought of death close-walking on the other side of me,
 And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions,
 I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
 Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness,
 To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

What enables Whitman to answer the sound of the thrush, who calls from the afterlife near the “ghostly pines so still,” is his walking “with the knowledge of death” on one side of him and the “thought of death” on the other, as he moves in the middle between the two. He walks with the “knowledge” and information that death will occur in the future and the “thought” or reflection of death as it has occurred in the past, while he himself unites them together in the present. How does this relationship with death arise? This precise moment and passage circles back to the first two stanzas of “Lilacs,” which is the only other place in the poem where two similar embodiments of death exist:

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

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

These two stanzas are anchored by two consecutive uses of the word “ever-returning” that functions as a beginning *and* an end to the lines, coexisting together. The word “ever-returning,” like Whitman, is placed directly in the middle between the knowledge of death (“I mourn’d, and yet shall mourn,” looking to the future) and the thought of death (the “thought of [Lincoln],” who

has died, reflecting on the past). This direct parallel sets up his elegiac project's groundbreaking point: Whitman, along with his chorus of the dead, are rendered "ever-returning" as they are brought into the literary afterlife that he has created in the space between the lines. Just as spring returns with the lilac in its "perennial" bloom, so, too, does Whitman return with the drooping star and with the bodies and souls of the dead: his perennial retrievements out of the night.

Afterword

It was a sunny but brisk afternoon on March 4, 1861, as newly elected Abraham Lincoln rode in an open carriage through Washington D.C. He had been staying at the Willard Hotel, a great monolith of a building with lavishly gilded ceilings and Romanesque columns, on the corner of Fourteenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue just two blocks east of the White House. Lincoln had been meeting with President James Buchanan to discuss the constitutionality of the Southern states' secession from the Union – South Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas had all declared themselves members of the new Confederate States. The two Presidents knew that war was inevitable, and for Lincoln in particular, violence and dissent was growing personal: because of a looming assassination conspiracy, George Winfield Scott had stationed guards and soldiers all along Lincoln's cavalcade while he made his way to the U.S. Capitol for his First Inaugural Address. At 1 P.M. on the Capitol portico, with the famous cast iron dome of the building still under construction, Lincoln delivered his speech.²³

For the most part, he spoke about the problem and divisiveness of slavery and suggested that he did not have the authority to interfere with its institutionalized place in Southern society. He did argue, however, that he was duty-bound to “preserve, protect, and defend” the United States Constitution, which established the Union as a legal and perpetual body. Every state – in the North *and* South – would have to agree to rescind any part of the Constitution. And as he vowed to honor and maintain the Union, the American people, he concluded his address by reflecting, with rather astonishing foresight, on the fact of death that would haunt America in the years following:

²³ This account is based on facts presented in Chapter 6 of Bradley R. Hoch's *The Lincoln Trail in Pennsylvania*. Refer to the Works Consulted page for a full citation.

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.²⁴

Before a nation of millions, Lincoln verbalized a powerful idea: families and friends remain, from “battlefield” to “grave” to “hearthstone,” entirely connected to one another. In Lincoln’s view, what unites people across time and space and even death are the “mystic chords of memory” that bend and resist the temperament of the time, however corrosive it may be.

In many ways, the language of Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address seems reminiscent of the unique blend of optimism and patriotism that Whitman took up in his poetry. Both Lincoln and Whitman emphasize comradeship, affection, and interconnectedness as means of embracing the national and local hardships posed by the Civil War. Lincoln’s invocation of the various sites of violence and death even echoes Whitman’s attempts to integrate sweeping images of war-torn land with private, intimate moments of grief-inflicted citizens. Both men study the link between music and memory and explore how things resonate together in an almost mystical way. But despite the many themes and rhetorical strategies they share, Lincoln and his language are very much of the time, while Whitman, in his effort to remain forever fresh and new, is unmistakably *not* of the time. The phrases “mystic chords of memory” and “better angels of our nature” recall popular notions of religious ties between the divine and the ordinary, good and evil, morality and immorality, with the implication being that the true force at work is God-given inspiration and guidance, both of which *are* the better angels that “touch” the chords of memory. Lincoln reveals his message to be one of maintaining religious devoutness, faith, and justice in the face of adversity, a message that was widely shared and valued by the American public.

²⁴ Refer to the Works Consulted page for the complete citation.

Whitman, on the other hand, proves in his major elegies that he is not particularly concerned with popular questions of morality or Divine Providence – he looks, instead, to the secular, to the everlasting beauty and generative capability of the body.

Whitman’s singular fascination with the body and the organic process it undergoes through death manifests most in his mourning of Lincoln, whose tragic assassination spawned a nationwide wave of mourning. People conveyed their feelings of loss and melancholy in an unprecedented range of expressive outlets: newspaper articles, poems, speeches, diary entries, letters, trial transcripts, and sermons. Nearly every prominent thinker and writer of the day – Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and James Russell Lowell included – offered their condolences and observations publicly to a grieving nation. From the thousands of firsthand accounts about the death of Lincoln, many overlapping sentiments emerged.²⁵

Among the Northerners who reacted to the assassination, some harbored feelings of hatred and disgust toward Southerners, as their thoughts of vengeance and retaliation filled the printed page. George Templeton Strong, a renowned lawyer who chronicled in a journal the entirety of his experience during the Civil War, wrote, “... the ferocious malignity of Southerners is infinite and inexhaustible. I am stunned, as by a fearful personal calamity” (164). Strong, like many others, “talk[ed] approvingly of vindictive justice and favor[ed] the introduction of judges, juries, gaolers, and hangmen among the dramatis personae” (165). He was not alone in blaming the South. Civil War battlefield journalist and correspondent Edmund Clarence Stedman also believed in exacting swift retribution against Southerners. In his poem “The Nation’s Loss,” Stedman suggested, “Henceforth all thoughts of pardon are too late; /

²⁵ I have drawn all sources and references in the following paragraphs from Harold Holzer’s *President Lincoln Assassinated!!!*. Refer to the Works Consulted page for a complete citation.

They, in whose cause that arm its weapon drew, / Have murdered MERCY. Now alone shall stand / Blind JUSTICE, with the sword unsheathed she wore” (184). As with Strong, Stedman argued that extending “pardon” to the South was unthinkable – only justice “with the sword unsheathed” could resolve the pain of mourning Lincoln. Some Northerners, such as abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips, proposed precise measures for enacting vengeance: “Banish every one of these thousand rebel leaders ... on pain of death if they ever return! Confiscate every dollar and acre they own. These steps the world and their followers will see are necessary to kill the seeds of caste, dangerous State rights and secession” (248). Common to each of these writers is the idea, essentially, to widen the divide between North and South by carrying out punishment.

While the turmoil surrounding Lincoln’s assassination gave rise to thoughts of retaliatory violence in the minds of some people, many turned to God and religion for clarity. At a meeting of colored citizens in Sacramento four days after the assassination, James Madison Bell delivered his tribute poem to Lincoln: “We know not why God has permitted / This tragic scene, this bloody deed Yet God, the Lord, doeth all things well!” (188). Bell’s reflection appears almost word for word in one of Sarah Morgan’s diary entries, written in Virginia five days after the assassination: “My life change, changes. I let it change as God will, feeling he doeth all things well” (193). The American public was trying to rely on faith for guidance and support, to trust that God would do “all things well,” which is what Lincoln had asked them to do at the end of his First Inaugural Address. Still, as some continued to question the event – “Oh why did a just and merciful Providence permit this thing to happen?” (238) asked Wilbur Fisk – others, like Isaac Mayer White, sermonized about the new understanding that could be taken from the tragedy: “Repentance is the great lesson which this deplorable event should teach us. Away with your idols of silver and your idols of gold ... prostrate yourselves with humble spirits and

contrite hearts before God” (214). With every message of vengeance as an answer to Southern wrong, there was an equally affective message of repentance and faith as an answer to Northern wrong.

A smaller contingency of Americans resisted these feelings of enmity and repentance in the days following Lincoln’s death, and they focused instead on the problem of grief, specifically, how to memorialize the President himself. On April 24, historian George Bancroft addressed a crowd at Union Square in New York, and said, “Grief must take the character of action, and breathe itself forth in the assertion of the policy to which [Lincoln] fell a victim. The standard which he held in his hand must be uplifted again higher and more firmly than before, and must be carried on to triumph” (253). Bancroft argued in favor of a different approach to mourning: neither anger nor casting about for answers were the right ways to honor Lincoln. In other words, the focus should not be about the people, but rather Lincoln himself, whose legacy must be “uplifted” in “triumph” for the future. Renowned poet William Cullen Bryant also placed his attention on Lincoln, and wrote in his poem “The Death of Lincoln,” “The task is done – the bond are free, / We bear thee to an honored grave, / Whose proudest monument shall be / The broken fetters of the slave” (258). The task for Americans was to erect an “honored grave” for the fallen President and to enshrine the ideals of freedom he embodied.

What emerges from these different poems, articles, sermons, lectures, and diary entries is a portrait of the American culture at the time of its mourning Lincoln’s death. His assassination was the most tremendous shock in American history, in part because, as Henry J. Raymond articulated at the time, it arrived at “the very moment when [Lincoln] was closing the rebellion which had drenched our land in blood and tears,” and that a “man so gentle, so kind, so free from every particle of malice or unkindness . . . should be chosen for his murder, adds a new element

of horror” (174). Amid the nationwide confusion, people demanded punishment, asked God for answers, and built monuments to their tragic hero.

Whitman, in his poetry about Lincoln and death, performs none of those actions. He shows no trace of hatred toward the South, he does not take up the questions of God or religion, nor he does contemplate or describe the raising of any kind of grave for Lincoln. Moreover, among the firsthand historical accounts examined in this afterword, *not one* of them argues or suggests the possibility that Lincoln still lives on in some form – not one argues that he is, in some way, still with the American people. Whitman alone, in his radical perceptions about the body and death demonstrated in his major elegies, proposes that Lincoln is *not* totally separated from the living, but rather he is, as Whitman writes in “Lilacs,” ever-returning. Indeed, for Whitman, the tragedy of Lincoln’s assassination becomes a point of affirmation: “And again lo! the pulsations in all matter, all spirit, throbbing forever – the eternal beats, eternal systole and diastole of life in things – wherefrom I feel and know that death is not the ending, as was thought, but rather the real beginning – and that nothing ever is or can be lost, nor ever die.”²⁶

²⁶ From “Democratic Vistas.” *LOA* 988.

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