"Wheel in Large Circles": Whitman's Spiral Poetics

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Abstract:

This article explores the expansive poetics of positivity and affirmative relationship deployed in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" by Walt Whitman. By engaging with other readings of Whitman's poem, this essay highlights the ways themes such as doubt and indeterminacy have been included in the scope of Whitman's poetics. However, it is shown that a focus on these negative themes within the positivity of Whitman's oeuvre can occlude the greater accomplishment of his verse: the inclusion of negativity within positivity and vice-versa—the turn of one into the other and the turn outward produced by just such a continuous turn. Furthermore, the argument asserts that this radical inclusivity, this simultaneous inward-outward turn, achieves Whitman's goal of expanding notions of the self and of the poem, both of which are empowered to expand beyond the body (of the work) and into the whole of the universe. Thus, Whitman's poetic project is to contain everything within the realm of the poetic and in so doing free all things to the play of poetry.

Betsy Erkkila's essay "The Poetics of Reconstruction: Whitman the Political Poet after the Civil War" tracks a shift in Walt Whitman's work "from a focus on self, life, body, light, day, and the social world toward a focus on the cosmos, death, soul, darkness, night, and the spiritual world" (900)—a shift that begins with, or at least find its fullest expression in, a "physically paralysed and politically disillusioned, Whitman" (892). In fact, "The Poetics of Reconstruction" more pointedly locates Whitman's disillusionment "in the postwar period, [when] the more conservative sexual ideology of the new bourgeois order took hold, [and] his love relationships with men became a heightened source of self-torment and self-doubt" (891). But this reading of Whitman's doubt as a creeping poetic shift hastened by history's own shifting beneath the weight of socio-political influences ignores the fact that self-doubt, doubt, indeterminacy have figured in Whitman's writing since the first publication in 1855 of Leaves of Grass in the prewar United States. With this in mind, Michael Moon's "The Twenty-Ninth Bather: Identity, Fluidity, Gender, and Sexuality in Section 11 of 'Song of Myself'" brings us far closer to understanding doubt in Whitman's work when the essay, "rather than attempting to ground the exchanges transacted in the course of [Section 11] unequivocally in a single sub-vocabulary...attend[s] to the often peculiar terms in which these exchanges are conducted in Whitman's writing" (859). "The Twenty-Ninth Bather" moves toward an interpretation of the "feminine figure [in Section 11] not merely as a transvestite 'cover' for the (male) speaker's prohibited...desire for the male

bathers [but as a figure with which the speaker merges to become] neither determinately male nor female [but a] composite of [both]" (860). In other words, the space of this move, "one of intense indeterminacy" (862) allows "Whitman [to project] a space in which both women and men are free...to direct such a [desirous] gaze [and] also to fulfill the desires that impel the gaze" (861). Accordingly, "The Twenty-Ninth Bather" makes a case for doubt and indeterminacy as the space of Whitman's greatest realization of—affirmation of—his poetics of positivity and relationship wherein negatively skewed emotions (desire, doubt) are also part of the affirmative relationship of humanity. What both of these readings fall short of revealing, however, is the constellation of doubt within Whitman's poetics, which is a poetics of not just positivity and relationship but ever-expanding inclusion and radical (un)containment. While Moon's "Twenty-Ninth Bather" makes doubt the site of Whitman's purest poetic achievement, Erkkila's "Poetics of Reconstruction" seems to position doubt as the hinge on which he turned toward a different poetics. Both reduce Whitman's vision in their own way, Moon's by denying the expansiveness its right to full expression in any space and Erkkila's by dividing his work into separate strains of light and dark. But from a close reading of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," which appeared for the first time in Whitman's second edition of Leaves of Grass in 1856, it is clear that there are many spaces (image, action, the self, multitudes, etc.), all of them simultaneously acting as hinges, , in which Whitman finds his poetics realized and affirmed , from all of which he

may turn at any given moment (in)to another space.

The case for doubt as a way into the many spaced, many hinged poetics of Walt Whitman begins with the title of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," which appeared under the title "Sun-Down Poem" in the second edition of Leaves. My text, being from the 1881 edition, reveals a revision of not only title but line as well: "some fourteen lines were dropped and quite a number of phrases amended" (Moon 135n1) over the many editions of Leaves. The indeterminacy of the container is important not only because it reveals a doubt in Whitman's work earlier than "The Poetics of Reconstruction" would place it, but also because it shows that turn from doubt toward other concerns; it shows a productive doubt that is the condition of possibility for the other spaces which, expanding and unwilling to be contained within one space, become conditions of possibility themselves. This begs the question What is this doubt's condition of possibility "in a composition whose first version evidenced a mastery of artistic power" (Moon 135n1)

To answer that question, we must start at the beginning, with Section 1's "Flood-tide…face to face" (1) with the speaker who also faces "Clouds of the west [and the] sun there half an hour high" (2). Not only does the speaker reflect on nature, but the water, the flood-tide, later reflects him with "centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of [his] head in the sunlit water" (33). In the space of the poem, a reflection on nature becomes a reflection on the self—the self both containing and being contained in nature, who in containing one another are wholly uncontained. After the speaker notices the clouds and sun in addition to the flood-tide, there is a stanza break to indicate a shift—the first of Whitman's many turns—toward "Crowds of men and women… / hundreds and hundreds…more curious to [the speaker] than you suppose" (3-4). They are not yet face to face with the speaker, perhaps because of the distance between them (on the ferry) and the speaker (on the dock), but this second stanza of Section 1 reveals a reflection on and of the other's face, a reflection of multitudes. Because the frame of this section is nature-based, because it is aqueous and reflective, Whitman's entry into "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" suggests that the multitudes are also (un)contained in the self that looks upon them and vice-versa. The speaker reflects on (in another sense) the multitudes as he does the water, and what follows is that the space of the self enacts the first enfolding of other spaces (nature, multitude/the crowd). Moreover, the distance between them, the curiosity, and even the time that separate the speaker from "you that shall cross from shore to shore years

years hence" (5) are spaces within the expanse that beget further spaces and (un)contain one another in conjunction. More importantly, it is the flood-tide—the natural—the reflective surface, that becomes the actual plane (condition of possibility) from which all others emanate, and from that which emanates from it, the flood-tide will eventually rise again and reappear.

The turn toward time in the final line of Section 1 is reflected in beginning of Section 2 with its reference to "The impalpable sustenance of me [the speaker, the self] from all things at all hours of the day, / The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, [the self] disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme, / The similitudes of the past and those of the future" (6-8). The hours of the day become inconsequential as they blend into one another under the rule of the word "all" and time is made its own similitude between past and future. Furthermore, here the connection between the self and the multitudes (past, present, and future) is expanded and complicated. The stanza goes on in anaphoric catalog and ends without a verb that is not rendered a participle, giving what appears at first to be a sentence an indeterminacy normal speech does not deploy. In fact, this indeterminacy, this doubt as to who or what is doing what to what, performs the disintegration of the self and the multitudes ("every one") at the same time as it performs the scheme making function that unites the self with the multitudes by compiling just such a list-stanza. Without active verbs, it is unclear where one thing ends and another begins, but the similitude of time itself stretches forth into the second stanza to allow the "Others [to function distinctly, to] enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore" (13) in the future. In fact, time no longer has to do the heavy lifting, for as promised, the poem turns once again toward nature to make another connection between the present and future, claiming "Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high" (17). Not only will the others of the future see the sun just as the speaker sees it, they will see the multitudes too. Thus, the speaker, the multitudes, and all their future iterations are (dis)integrated into the scheme (space) of action as well as that of time and of the poem's own structure.

The opening line of Section 3 makes it clear, though, that the poem has been leading up to this conclusion: "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not" (20). While this statement seems to close up the gap between the speaker and the multitudes past, present, and future, what it actually does is reveal distance as its own scheme, in which a spatiotemporal composite exists

alongside the action-composite and the natural composite. In fact, distance, action, and nature seem to (dis)integrate into one another as the speaker claims to be "with [the] men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence" (21), having overcome the spatiotemporal gap to confirm that "Just as [they] feel when [they] look on the river and sky, so [the speaker] felt" (22). Here, distance is gone and the speaker and the multitudes look (or act) on the same thing: nature. A catalog of all the things that the speaker did the same as the multitudes will do follows and again creates an indeterminacy of where feeling or perception begins and another ends.

In fact, the act of visual perception becomes especially important in the second stanza of Section 3 where the verbs "see" and "look" alternate position as the anaphoric note before giving way to the images perceived, which cascade in yet another indeterminate scheme predicated by the definite article. At that point, from "The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars / … / [to] the neighboring shore [with its] fires from the foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night" (39-47), actions again take a back seat to images, with any verbs that do appear conjugated once more as gerunds or participles. At the same time as these conjugations seem to limit or contain the power of the verbs as Section 3 closes, they expand the ability of the verbs to act on other elements of the poem. Though the actions they suggest are weakened, they almost take on the quality of adjectives without losing the implied movement/change of action. "Burning" is not only something the fires are doing but also something inherent to them, an essential process and a descriptor. This indeterminacy of linguistic effect mirrors the indeterminacy of scheme pervading the poem and begins to imply, through its juxtaposition with and return to them, that these images themselves are vague and loosely defined such that they also blend into one another and act on one another in ways to which a determined, straight-forward, and everyday speech could never give foundation. Furthermore, the space of indeterminacy or doubt, then, is implied as a foundation (or co-foundation with nature since they enfold one another) of the other spaces/schemes.

Again, into Section 4, the schemes fade into one another (image, action, nature, time, place, distance, self, crowd, etc.) as Whitman's speaker reminds his addressee(s) that

These and all else were to [him] the same
as they are to you,
[he] loved well those cities, loved well the
stately and rapid river,

The men and women [he] saw were all
near to [him],
Others the same—others who look back
on [him] because [he] look'd forward to
them,
(The time will come, though [he] stop[s]
here to-day and to-night.) (49-53)

But this serves mainly as a performance, an actualization, of each scheme's return to each other (the self to the crowd to nature to distance to time) and as a framework from which Whitman's speaker can move into Section 5.

There, doubt and indeterminacy begin to manifest, to reveal indeterminacy as scheme more clearly than the suggestion of its presence by each scheme before it. Time, too, seems to stop the speaker as Section 4 ends, causing him to wonder at the beginning of Section 5 "What is it then between us? / What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us" (54-5)? This space is not one on which the speaker wishes to dwell, however, and he quickly restates "Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not" (56), folding doubt back into other schemes, distance and place, as quickly as it rose out of time. By going on to list further similitudes of these other schemes, it may seem as though the speaker deals too flippantly with doubt, that doubt may in fact be something other than a uniting feature, may be something that rips at the fabric of Whitman's poetic schematic. But in refusing to answer the questions he himself poses, the speaker forces the poem to perform the action of indeterminacy. Furthermore, the scheme of doubt is, in being covered by distance and place, inscribed in the other schemes just as they have already contained and produced one another before. At nearly the same moment doubt is explicitly introduced, it is levelled with the other poetic spaces that condition each other's possibility—at once completely embodying itself and (un)folding into other modes of expansion (if we assume the production of questions brought on by doubt as an expansion in its own right) essential to Whitman's poetics. Thus, by the end of Section 5, the speaker leads his addressee(s) to believe that doubt has been thoroughly dealt with: "That [he] was [he] knew of [his] body, and what [he] should be [he] knew [he] should be of his body" (64)—a statement that seems to oppose the self (at the least the physical self) to doubt.

However, the speaker in Section 6 suggests doubt's return, saying "It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall, / The dark threw its patches down upon [him] also" (65-6). Here, though, doubt returns so that it can be folded into the schemes other than distance and place. The dark patches of doubt fall on the speaker, covering the self just just as it seemed the self was covering doubt at the end of Section 5 and displaying the twist and (re)turn toward expansion and

inclusivity of Whitman's poetics. In using the word "also," the speaker deftly inscribes the crowd, the multitude, in this enfolding. Moreover, "also" acts as a point of enclosure, within which the self and doubt are further folded into the multitude, whose mention begins Section 6. Therefore, the (space of the) multitudes contain the self, which contains doubt, which contains the self, which contains multitudes.

This circularity is the fullest expression of Whitman's dynamically inclusive and expansive poetics. It moves outward like a spiral, like the "sea-birds! [who] wheel in large circles high in the air" (114) in the final section of the poem. These circling birds are preceded by an image- and action-packed sequence that reintroduces all of the schemes established throughout the poem so that the circle circumscribes them while it moves outward to inscribe more than has been previously established, more than the speaker can name. This movement allows the poem to continue expanding, to simultaneously contain and let loose "nations…shadows…nightfall…dumb, beautiful ministers…eternity" (118-31). Whitman's speaker even explicitly commands his quickly accreting catalog "Expand… / … / [nothing] any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold [itself] from us" (124-8), disappearing himself into the "we," the collective, of this expanding, (un)containment. The movement continues toward eternity, forever expanding, beyond the poem even, spiraling out of the control of the self (the speaker) yet itself gaining full control (composition) of the universe.

From the restatement of the catalog (of images, actions, etc.) and re-inscription of the schemes to the breakdown of distinction, indeterminacy and determinacy (the catalog) become less distinct categories themselves, vague spaces. While at first this might seem to hearken back to Michael Moon's essay's claim that indeterminacy is where Whitman's poetics is most clearly articulated, it actually shows the way indeterminacy underlies (conditions the possibility for) the other spaces of Whitman's poems at the same time as more determinate spaces (image, action, etc.) underlie it. The twisting of these spaces, including the indeterminate space, into one another—their spiraling, circular, outward motion—further demonstrate this. . "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," then, shows that the motion of indeterminacy, which is then necessarily the motion of action, image, the self, the multitudes, nature, etc., has existed in Whitman since long before his disenchantment with politics and his health as suggested by Erkkila's essay. Both Erkkila's and Moon's essays point to doubt, uncover it, peel away the sometimes concealing action of the other spaces in Whitman's poetics but in so doing conceal those other spaces to some degree. Whitman's poetics are, however, about a profound unconcealment and an expansion toward total inclusion that contains all things that in containing frees all things to their own access to that expansion, which they themselves make possible. Thus, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," beyond showing doubt's positivity within the scheme of Whitman's poetics, frees, (un)contains, and shows how Whitman's poetics can reveal new affirmative/connective possibilities.

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