

Myself: Walt Whitman's Political, Theological Creature

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*Examining Walt Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" (from his 1855 collection Leaves of Grass), this article expounds upon the subject formation contained within it: the self. This self, developed through a variant of creation myth, is inflected with both political and theological agendas. The complex democratic negotiation of these poles places Whitman's poem in the realm of political theology. The first half of the essay traces the theological inflections in the poem: the impact, in other words, of the name of God on the formation, development, or thriving of the self. It also sketches the contours of Whitman's political context and lays bare some of his political agendas. The latter half of the essay speculates on some potential consequences of the development of this self and raises the question: How deeply is it already embedded in American democratic subjectivity?*²

*I have heard what the talkers were talking. . . .
the talk of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.*

*There was never any more inception than there is now.
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.*

*Urge, and urge, and urge,
Always the procreant urge of the world.*

—Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"¹

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¹ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1982), 28. References, here, to *Leaves of Grass* will come from either the initial 1855 edition or the final edition published during his lifetime, the 1891–1892 edition (what it sometimes called the "deathbed" edition.)

These progenitive, genetic invocations make it clear that this hymn of *self*, tucked into Walt Whitman's "new Bible"² *Leaves of Grass*, was the birth of a moment in the democratic, American scriptural trajectory. Like William Blake and the Romantic poets, Whitman seemed to understand that the *creation story*—and invocations of it—played a key role in de-territorializing, and re-territorializing, sacred forces. Through the creation myth poets aligned themselves with divine, creative urges, signalling their intent to recreate the poetic symbolics of human being. Like the Gnostics, argued Paul Cantor, they realized "that the only way to add to a supposedly complete revealed text is, not as one might suppose at the end, but rather at the beginning."³ The poet as new creator returns to origins.

A mere ten verses into his song of the new political creature—the American democratic *self*—Whitman betrays his shrewd theological sensitivity. This American *self* is not a historical development or an arbitrary political doctrine. It is a messy, fleshy, breathing, dancing *self* of sacred origin. Whitman sings the birth of a *self* who understands a handful of grass to be "the handkerchief of the Lord,"⁴ a *self* who remains erotically faithful to the holy, individuated, human body. "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from, / The scent of these arm-pits, is aroma finer than prayer, / This head is more than churches or bibles or creeds. / If I worship any particular thing, it shall be some of the spread of my body."⁵ Whitman's *self*, in other words, is immersed in a levelled reality where divinity is immanent, indiscriminately present in all matter, textual and tactile. "In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass; / I find letters from God dropped in the street—and every one is signed by God's name."⁶

This confession, at least in theory, is not meant to be about *one* sacred, holy body, or one individual. Whitman begins this poem with a clear dogmatic standard: "I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs

² David S. Reynolds, "Politics and Poetry: *Leaves of Grass* and the Social Crisis of the 1850s," in Ezra Greenspan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 89.

³ Paul Cantor, *Creature and Creator: Myth-making and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), xi.

⁴ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 31.

⁵ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 51.

⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 85.

to you.”⁷ This is not a song about Walt Whitman the individual as sacred figure. It is a song for fellow Americans, about the American body politic. It is a free verse, hymnal invocation of a newly created, newly incarnated, American political subject—divinely, tactilely, erotically connected to all other subjects in the collective body.

Whitman, says political theorist Eldon Eisenach, was one of America's great political theologians. “All who presume to instruct us regarding our national identity, our political obligations, and our moral duties are acting in the role of political theologians,” he proposed, distancing the concept of a civic political theology from ecclesial theology. “The political theologies that underwrote our various religious establishments in the past were not articulated as the creedal theology of any particular church but can be found in the literatures of religious revival (Jonathan Edwards), political history (George Bancroft), public oratory (Abraham Lincoln), poetry (Walt Whitman), philosophy (John Dewey) and philanthropy (Jane Addams).”⁸ The nature of this political theology differs significantly from German jurist Carl Schmitt's influential account of the theologico-political. Where Schmitt charged that all significant theories of the state were secularized theological concepts (the notion of sovereignty, in particular),⁹ Eisenach intimates that politics and theology might still be engaged in a mutually shaping dynamic.

Embedded within Whitman's “Song of Myself” is a poetic logic imbued with religious themes and symbols: what I will call a *theologic*. It was not, however, a theology shaped by the American *ecclesial* network. Nor does it have any stark affiliations with systematic, Christian, discourses of God. It was shaped contingently, constructively in, against, and around American *political* conflicts unique to Whitman's moment. It was a theology custom-made for a revived and refreshed American popular sovereignty. Both individual and porously collective, this political theology may give insight into the spiritual, democratic, affective intensities present in one of the most celebrated discourses of the American political *creature*—that is, the crafted, created, American democrat.

⁷ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 27.

⁸ Eldon Eisenach, *The Next Religious Establishment: National Identity and Political Theology in Post-Protestant America* (Langham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), xi.

⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36.

Whitman, Religiosity, and Secularity

Recent scholarship on Whitman has turned a more hawk-like eye to his politics. Betsy Erkkila's 1989 study was a critical force in this shift. She derided the durable focus on the "religio-spiritual," transcendental Whitman—a poet of the personal, or a happy individualism. This has, she wrote, "tended both to remove Whitman's work from the historic specificity of his time and to deflect attention from the more radical political posture of a poet who challenged the traditional hierarchies of power and domination; who celebrated the liberation of male and female, sex and the body, workers and poor persons, immigrants and slaves."¹⁰ Yet the religio-spiritual is so thickly embedded in his rhetoric, it is difficult to escape. D. J. Moores's transatlantic study of Wordsworth and Whitman finds a common element in what he calls "a mystical" or "cosmic rhetoric."¹¹ This returns them, however, to the sphere of the political, says Moores. These writers use this rhetoric as "a weapon of ideological resistance" refuting the "oft-levelled condemnation of Romanticism as a visionary mode that estranges the poet from legitimate human concerns."¹²

These poles (the *religio-spiritual* and the *political*) are often difficult for contemporary thinkers to bridge. The secularization thesis, intellectually dominant over the course of modernity, intimated that history's progress was an evacuation of religion from the public sphere. Whitman is celebrated, by some, as herald of a fresh and robust American secularism. Whitman, argued Richard Rorty, "offered new accounts of what America was, in the hope of mobilizing Americans as political agents." The most striking feature of Whitman's America was "its thoroughgoing secularism. In the past, most of the stories that have incited nations to projects of self-improvement have been stories about their obligation to one or more gods."¹³ Whitman, however, wanted Americans "to drop any reference to divine favour or wrath," hoping "to separate the fraternity and loving kindness urged by the Christian scriptures from the ideals of supernatural parentage,

¹⁰ Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 7.

¹¹ D. J. Moores, *Mystical Discourse in Wordsworth and Whitman: A Transatlantic Bridge* (Leuven and Dudley, Mass.: Peeters, 2006), 13.

¹² Moores, *Mystical Discourse*, 17.

¹³ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 15.

immortality, and—most important—sin.”¹⁴ Whitman’s certainly was not a vision of theocracy, or a myth of creation by a transcendent and sovereign super father. Whitman was not concerned with the *obligations* Americans might feel toward deity. But his evocations of divinity—in the faces of strangers, lovers, prostitutes—and his presentations of God as coexistent with human brothers and sisters, in a levelled democratic reality, do not seem to lend strong support to the notion that God, or the gods, had nothing to do with his new America. Even a strange new, more allusive immortality makes an appearance: “I am the poet of commonsense and of the demonstrable and of immortality;”¹⁵ wrote Whitman. “I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself; / They do not know how immortal, but I know.”¹⁶

Others have appreciated the religiosity of Whitman’s themes more than Rorty. Some, almost fanatically. Whitman was treated, in his own day, as a true poet/prophet. Michael Robertson’s new study calls the early followers of Whitman his *disciples* (a prestigious group including members of the intellectual elite, such as Oscar Wilde). Many believed that Whitman was the prophet of a new religion. A note to Whitman from Harvard Divinity School dropout William Sloane Kennedy queried: “Do you suppose a thousand years from now people will be celebrating the birth of Walt Whitman as they are now the birth of Christ?”¹⁷ There are still Americans who, to this day, read Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* as a sort of scripture.¹⁸

In his freeform theology, Whitman incorporated reactions to, and against, various threads of Christianity. The theological framework of his childhood was erected around primarily Quaker and Deist philosophies (his own father knew Thomas Paine). His later notion that all faiths might be placed on a similar plane of truth received early affirmation, and the proposition of *inner light* is something that his

¹⁴ Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 16.

¹⁵ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 48.

¹⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 33.

¹⁷ Michael Robertson, “Reading Whitman Religiously,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54 no. 3 (2008). Available at <http://chronicle.com/article/Reading-Whitman-Religiously/29239>. Accessed on 2 February 2010.

¹⁸ Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 13.

later work—on the spirit within the body—never dropped.¹⁹ Much of his sensual celebration of the body was, of course, a reaction against the phobic New England Puritanism around him and, as a reaction, bears the mark of what it shunned. By the time Whitman reached adulthood, massive changes were occurring on the American religious stage. A new evangelism swept the country. The perceived rigidity of institutionalized forms of Christianity that many evangelicals reacted against was a cry that Whitman responded to. He was impressed by the way in which new theologies elevated the human/anthropic elements of theology, and he made use of the almost generic religiosity of the new public sphere. “Promoters of religion” among Whitman and his contemporaries “could be thoroughly enjoyed without reference to the churches with which they were associated.”²⁰ Yet, while many of these other promoters witnessed the growth of a Christ-centered faith, Whitman’s developing theology was shaped by other leanings. He was concerned with responding directly to the *political* culture around him.

Beyond the political fact of the divided/dividing Union, Whitman was wrapped up in the politics of scientific/technological culture. For intellectual resources, he pulled from work that could respond to these political realities. Christian Sheppard suggests that Whitman was particularly affected by Kant, who intimated that our only possible encounter with reality was our own experience. “To an American reader of Kant, such as Whitman, reality itself suddenly seemed as remote as the God of the Puritans”—an affection which Whitman confesses in some vulnerable poetic moments.²¹ Whitman turned for aid to his elder Ralph Waldo Emerson, who absorbed Kant’s transcendental formulation and repackaged it as a mystical self-reliance—locking spirituality and the experiencing body, into one force. It was a sort of hybridized philosophical theology, enabling the *experience* of faith. “Against the backdrop of Kant-inspired despair, we see how hard-won these most hopeful American visions are,” argues Sheppard. “What looked at first like a cheap American optimism suddenly

¹⁹ David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

²⁰ Reynolds, *Walt Whitman*, 88.

²¹ Christian Sheppard, “Walt Whitman’s Mystic Deliria,” in Regina M. Schwartz, ed., *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 196.

seems more like an outrageous wager of faith.”²² With all reality and experience now levelled onto the same plane of reality as the body itself, Whitman's relationship to deity was inevitably altered as well. His God was not the remote Puritan God. Whitman's was up close and personal—present in everything. Thus, a Whitmanesque political theology could not possibly see a Calvinist's governing God at work behind the machinations of political action. Rather, Whitman's poetics placed God on the same democratic plane as the body. The infusion and presence of God did not build support for theocracy. This materializing infusion animated, penetrated, and coexisted with the bodies that made politics. It was a complex theology, articulated contingently alongside his pragmatic political vision for the American democracy.

Whitman's poetics emerge not as a purely religious or secular force, but as a site of contestability on which both constructs recognize themselves. Whitman's *self*, then, might emerge as a formulation not unlike the Romantic subject described by Colin Jager. Uncoupling this subjective mode from a coherent genealogy in either religious or secular frameworks, a new pliability emerges in which the Romantic subject (here acting as poet/prophet) appears to make appeals to both. “Though such language is unfashionable now,” Jager writes, “romanticism has long been interpreted as offering a concept of literary representation capacious enough to negotiate among competing philosophical, metaphysical, and spiritual claims.”²³ A poet like Whitman might be read less as eradicating or eviscerating religion than he was seeking to recode, transpose, or repossess it. To speak of his political theology—to speak of Walt Whitman's American *self*—is to speak of complex images, ideas, urges, and celebrations which do not necessarily fit cleanly into contemporary categories of either religiosity or secularity.

Whitman Contra Ecclesia

What should be made clear, first and foremost, is what this political theology *was not*. It was not a theology of the church. Walt Whitman did not have a theology of the church, and “Song of Myself”

²² Sheppard, “Walt Whitman's Mystic Deliria,” 197.

²³ Colin Jager, “After the Secular: The Subject of Romanticism,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 301. Available at <http://publicculture.dukejournals.org/cgi/content/full/18/2/301>. Accessed on 2 February 2010.

bears witness to his strong, intense, anti-ecclesial bent. Recall the injunction in his creation verse: "I have heard what the talkers were talking. . . . the talk of the beginning and the end, / But I do not talk of the beginning or the end."²⁴ Whitman saw himself breaking out of the linear narrative of creation and redemption preached in the New England churches around him. His song of *self*, he promised, was an opportunity to do away with sacred books and instead "possess the origin of all poems," allowing the *self* to "no longer take things at second or third hand. . . . nor look through the eyes of the dead. . . . nor feed on the spectres in books."²⁵ There is here a tongue-in-cheek denigration of the religious tradition based on sacred Scripture. Whitman aligned it with death, and stale morbidity. In spite of the fact that he, too, has trapped his reader in text (working with the clay of tradition), he urged the reader to then look away. "You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me."²⁶ His song was a celebration of *voice* or *music* or *sound*, not about alphabetic, black-and-white, paperbound text technology.

It is not that Whitman *hated* the church. "I do not despise you, priests;" his *self* assured. He simply found their sacred traditions too small, too limited, too particular. "My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, / Enclosing all worship ancient and modern, and all between ancient and modern, / Believing I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years, / Waiting responses from oracles. . . . honoring the Gods. . . . saluting the sun, / Making a fetish of the first rock or stump. . . . powowing with sticks in the circle of obis."²⁷ The church as structural and institutional entity did not have the conceptual flexibility Whitman needed. He needed to sing of membership in a body politic that broke out of text, ecclesial hierarchies, or a building whose walls contained the heart of worship.

Tracy Fessenden, studying the canonical nineteenth-century American literary renaissance, argues that in the literature of the antebellum period a certain form of Protestant Christianity with a social evolutionary perspective of religion (contrasted with the deep ecclesiology of the Catholic Church) was emerging. Pulling from facets of the Christian tradition, this discourse argued that America was

²⁴ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 28.

²⁵ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 28.

²⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 28.

²⁷ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 77.

“a transcendent nation, where denominational, racial, class, even national differences dissolve in the light of its world historical mission.”²⁸ It was a development in American democracy, she says, that allowed a certain form of Christianity to be democratized, “framed as the removal of artificiality and implicitly coercive religious acculturations.”²⁹ That is, a development born out of an exclusion. This exclusion is, she says, particularly apparent in Whitman's theologic. “Consciousness of diversity liberates, says *Leaves of Grass*, yet Whitman can rejoice in a free play of identities—Yankee girl, Brooklyn rough, half-breed, slave—only by negating the diversity of consciousness.”³⁰

Although I will argue later that the fusion of Christian visions, symbols, ideals, and democratic politics was not necessarily a simple transposition or simple Americanization of an evangelical Protestant theology, I would like to highlight the manner in which Whitman's quest to develop a new spiritual sensibility for his song of the American *self* developed out of an exclusion. Walter Lowe's formulation of what he calls the *vitalistic triumphalism* of the Romantic Movement and its prophetic/poetic progenitors brings to the surface some of the seductive—yet violent—tensions that gave the movement shape. “This luminous presence, bringer of a New Day, is Romanticism's particular achievement, the fusion of prophet and poet. For those who are concerned, as so many of us are, to break free of the constraints of religious reification, the figure of poet-prophet can be virtually irresistible.”³¹ The figure, says Lowe, is “a relentless denunciation of anything that bears a suggestion of religious reification. And what are the marks of reification? They are: a credulous penchant for the literal; attachment to the dead letter; refusal to hear the living Word; adherence to form and institution; resistance to the spirit; subservience to the law.” It is, says Lowe, “a familiar and effective polemic.” He seeks to draw a parallel between this cosmology and a facet of the Christian religious tradition, arguing that “within [this posture] reside the essential elements of anti-Judaism.”³²

²⁸ Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, N.J. and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 93.

²⁹ Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 97.

³⁰ Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 97.

³¹ Walter Lowe, “Christianity and Anti-Judaism,” in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 115.

³² Lowe, “Christianity and Anti-Judaism,” 116.

Whitman, asserting the spiritual authority of the embodied American *self*, divinely linked to fellow American bodies in the tumultuous body politic, established his notion of community against the ecclesial community that was the body of the church—often called, in Christian doctrine, the body of Christ. In acknowledging this critical exclusion, the founding action of Whitman’s song takes on a tone which is absent from his own discourse—evoking the violent nature of both authority and politics. Given the authority of a certain political theology, Whitman’s song even begins to echo with the founding violence of law. “Since the origin of authority,” wrote Jacques Derrida, “the founding or grounding, the positing of the law cannot by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground. This is not to say that they are in themselves unjust, in the sense of ‘illegal’ or ‘illegitimate.’ They are neither legal nor illegal in their founding moment.”³³ The pulling forth and making bare of this exclusion is not to make an argument for its *legality*. It is, rather, to gaze at the sum of parts—and to make the exclusions that Whitman might have preferred to leave out, hover in the background.

Whitman, Theologico-Politicus

What was, then, the variety of theologico-political, poetic logic that emerged from Whitman’s song of *self*? What were its primary preoccupations? The fusion of theological and political thought often derails theology from its more habitual quarters—where doctrines such as God and the World are clearly a part and parcel of the enterprise. A political theology might, then, be more concerned with the theological inflections emerging from political ideals or democratic principles. Whitman as theologico-political creator was not concerned with transposing particular Christian theological doctrines into politics. Rather, his intent was to vivify what he saw as waning enthusiasm for the democratic principles born of the American Revolution with a new affective energy. In his incitement of this affective energy—the harmonies and poetics of his song of *self*—he blended his own improvisational, constructive, theological landscape with the image of a new America—an image in which the body, the *self*, was underwritten with a deeply immanent divine.

³³ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. and intro. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 242.

Although Whitman is known as America's poet, he spent the early years of his career working as a political journalist. He was, in this context, known to have radical perspectives, and often engaged in heated polemics.³⁴ The root of much polemic was his deep distaste for politicians and political parties—an aversion which seemed to apply to all but Abraham Lincoln (melancholy subject of some of Whitman's best-remembered work).³⁵ He carried this aversion into his literary venture. "Whitman's entire career as a poet is characterized by collisions with civil institutions and public authority."³⁶ What Whitman maintained, over and against much of the political culture of his time, was a "dogmatic faith" in the political ideals he saw in the American Revolution.³⁷ But the country, which Whitman believed should be unified, had become deeply divided.

Animosities were flaring in Congress over the issue of slavery by 1850,³⁸ five years before Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. He was neither an abolitionist, nor a supporter of slavery. Whitman was opposed to deep divisions between North and South. "Anything that threatened his balance was anathema to him. He vigorously denounced the opposing camps of pro-slavery southern fire-eaters and northern abolitionists. Both, he insisted, threatened to rip apart the Union."³⁹ In his cries for a new order, we tend to forget how conservative his appeals really were. "He feared what was then called 'ultraism,' or any form of extreme social activism that he thought might rip apart the social fabric."⁴⁰

With the journalist's passion for civic duty, Whitman believed he had a critical role to play in what he sensed was ultimately a tragic dissolution of the Union. He was not convinced that the journalist's forum was primed for success, however. In his quest to serve as balancing agent, Whitman leaned heavily on a new textual form: "poetry that took both sides while at the same time releasing the stream of curses. He began what would become a longterm strategy of his: resolving

³⁴ William Pannapacker, *Revised Lives: Walt Whitman and Nineteenth-Century Authorship* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 25.

³⁵ Pannapacker, *Revised Lives*, 19.

³⁶ Pannapacker, *Revised Lives*, 10.

³⁷ Pannapacker, *Revised Lives*, 20.

³⁸ Reynolds, *Walt Whitman*, 66.

³⁹ Reynolds, *Walt Whitman*, 69.

⁴⁰ Reynolds, *Walt Whitman*, 83.

thorny political issues by linguistic fiat.”⁴¹ Martha Nussbaum affirms Whitman’s intuition that a “public poetry” of the national emotions was the logical site on which to build a democratic ethic in a tense political environment. His robust and auto-affirming *self* suggested that “the ideal leader of a democracy [was] the poetic inhabitator of all its varied lives.”⁴² This was part and parcel of the radical acceptance, the unthinkable embrace, he hoped the divided nation would succumb to through his poetics. “Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, / Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.”⁴³

Whitman’s democratic ethic, says Nussbaum, was one of *love*—a practice which he intended to incite using erotic imagery and language. His evocation of male-to-male love, of the texture and intimate aroma of bodies, was distasteful to many contemporaries. But his messy, chaotic, and celebratory fusion of flesh and sacrality has (with or without his contribution) become one of the most deeply venerated facets of contemporary American practical, political, and spiritual life. A fleshy sexual freedom is, for many, synonymous with democratic freedom—although, arguably, it is not often held in close conjunction with radical fraternity, as it was for the poet. “Whitman insistently pursues these themes throughout his career,” says Nussbaum, “holding that the appropriate conception of democratic love cannot be articulated without forging a new attitude toward both the body and its sexuality. The poetry of equality must also be erotic in a bold and defiant manner. And the erotic must be frankly sexual.”⁴⁴ This eroticism was illustrated in his poem as an encounter between individual bodies. But it was meant to cross, to bridge, to heal, the deeper division in the political Union. Whitman was urging conversions, hoping to turn an atmosphere of social distrust into “an aesthetic of affection, loyalty, and love.”⁴⁵

What Whitman was, mythically and poetically, creating—Nussbaum argues—was a new cosmology. In his flash-in-the-pan creation myth, Whitman promised to show the reader the “origin of all

⁴¹ Reynolds, *Walt Whitman*, 69.

⁴² Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 435.

⁴³ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 29.

⁴⁴ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 646.

⁴⁵ Vivian R. Pollack, *The Erotic Whitman* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), 126.

poems.” Consistently, he expressed an abundant confidence that his poetics illustrated exactly *how things work*. He was willing to take on all of the major themes, to prove that the spirituality of this *self* was truly as all-encompassing, as universal, as impossible to refute as he promised. “The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,” he wrote. “All goes onward and outward . . . nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.”⁴⁶ The participation of the *self* in this endless democracy never ends.

“Whitman sets out to create his own counter-metaphysical system of love,” says Nussbaum, “that will express what he sees as religious metaphysics’ true basis. Setting himself in the tradition of the cosmological writing of both Greek and Christian philosophy he attempts to create a democratic counter-cosmos, in which hierarchies of souls are replaced by the democratic body of the United States, which he calls ‘the greatest poem.’”⁴⁷ Within this democratic “counter-cosmos,” the body is the site of endless revelation. Corruption is refusing to celebrate the body, with all of its wounds, sores, and intimate scents. This is a democracy whose doctrinal basis is in sensual experience. By affirming that the democratic *self* is fundamentally “material, experiential, Whitman recognizes our irreducible particularity as the essence of democracy and its central truth.”⁴⁸ The beginning of democratic citizenship is, then, the body and its senses. Yet it is a body which—in order to be democratic—cannot be divorced from its sense of *self*. This is the subjective formulation that keeps one body linked to another in fraternity and equality. It is a fluid, permeable, decentralized, never quite fully individualized *self*.⁴⁹ In the poet’s immaculately crafted text, the notion of democratic political/philosophical subjectivity is naturalized as the porously fluctuating body, or the *self*. Whitman uses the body—with its own potential to be simultaneously contained and porous—to illustrate how the American body politic ought to regard itself. The poet walks through the world, observing bodies (babies, slaves, suicides, trappers, blacksmiths, prostitutes), proclaiming to *be* each and every one of them. He (as *every body*) is virtually inescapable. He is “around, tenacious,

⁴⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 32.

⁴⁷ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 656.

⁴⁸ Stephen Jon Mack, *The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy* (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 36.

⁴⁹ Peter J. Bellis, *Writing Revolution: Aesthetics and Politics in Hawthorne, Whitman, and Thoreau* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 72.

acquisitive, tireless. . . . and can never be shaken away.”⁵⁰ His *self* is naturalized into the democratic landscape, refusing to accord any privacy: “I see through the broadcloth and gingham.”⁵¹

Indeed, the theme of the *natural* (the American soil on which the body politic makes its life) is particularly important to Whitman’s political poetics. David Reynolds argues that nature serves as a spiritual antiseptic in *Leaves of Grass*. It “becomes more than just a Wordsworthian or Emersonian source of spiritual inspiration (though it is that too). It is a cleansing solvent into which Whitman casts all the disagreeable aspects of American experience, to be made pure and healthy.”⁵² Nature is the source of holy purity. The texture and tactility of the American landscape promises to cast out negative spirits in the body politic. It was in nature itself, Reynolds argues, that Whitman’s democratic politics eventually came to rest. The phenomena and fates of body, sky, leaf, tree, sex, and smell are all linked. “If America saw its problems and its people cast amid nature imagery, perhaps it would change. Sectional divisions could be repaired by an absorptive poetic ‘I’ who traveled joyously through all the regions and revelled in the cycles of nature.” Corruption was countered by the abundance and bounty of the dreamy wilderness of American terrestrial life. Messianically, “the poet was ‘the age transfigured.’”⁵³ He propositioned Americans with a new political theology whose central mechanism was no more complex than the body, at home in the sacred context of the natural landscape.

Go With the Flow

As Whitman’s *self* takes form as a theologico-political construct, the relationship between the political subject and the theological subject inevitably becomes more analogous than we (living in a secularized America that, in theory, supports a separational chasm between church and state) might imagine it. A Whitmanesque poetic democracy is not a theocracy. But God pops up everywhere—appearing in human faces, scribing letters left behind on the street. Whitman’s political subject is not one who excludes faith, or divine presence, from his democratic logic. Does this mean that the subjective reality of

⁵⁰ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 33.

⁵¹ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 33.

⁵² Reynolds, *Walt Whitman*, 89.

⁵³ Reynolds, *Walt Whitman*, 89.

Whitman's *self* would be similar to the human creatures of a theologically Christian cosmology?

Whitman's *self*, with its messy, porous flows and fluctuations, bears a great deal of resemblance to Martin Luther's vision of a Christian subjectivity. Each seems to be wrapped into a state of temporal flow in which human becomes divine, becomes human. "In me the caresser of life," Whitman wrote, "wherever moving, backward as well as forward sluing / To niches aside and junior bending, not a person or object missing, / Absorbing all to myself and for this song."⁵⁴ In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther also spoke of a *flow of Christ*, affectively present to the Christian—the force of faith in the body. The *flow* that Luther saw at work in the world was one in which an affective goodness "from God should flow from one to the other and be common to all. . . . From Christ the good things have flowed and are flowing into us."⁵⁵ So the doctrine of Christ, for Luther, is not the assertion of an historical inception. Rather, it is based on what Christ does affectively in the body. It is a flow of the good.

Mark C. Taylor has suggested that modern accounts of subjectivity (influenced, as Whitman was, by Kant) are tied to this Lutheran variety of subject formation. "Luther's refiguring of theology, anthropology, and cosmology prepared the way for what eventually became the modern world," he writes. "Late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theologians, philosophers, poets, and artists directly and indirectly refined and extended the Reformation account of subjectivity in ways that created the conditions for the rise of postmodernism at the end of the twentieth century."⁵⁶ In his blending of the mystic and the nominalistic, Luther struck at the paradoxical core that remains integral for even contemporary theories of subjectivity.⁵⁷ Luther's was an inward turn in which—simultaneously—what was most interior also became most exterior. The most intimate core of the human creature became the allusive and mysterious encounter with the divine suggestion. The more internal the subject becomes, the more paradoxical its very subjectivity becomes.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1891–1892) in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1982), 37.

⁵⁵ Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1989), 623.

⁵⁶ Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 44.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *After God*, 55.

⁵⁸ Taylor, *After God*, 63.

Whitman represents this paradox well—in a *self* that confesses to be both the most radically particular entity (body) as well as the most universal (world or nature). Yet there is a drastic difference between the course of these *flows* which must be taken into account. While Whitman was deeply confident in the infallibly good and sinless nature of the *self*, Luther saw—at the heart of what is human—corruption, capable of doing violence to other creatures (committing sin). This is why he (unlike Whitman) would never be ambiguous about the flow of a human subjectivity and the subjective flow of Christ.

Critically, Luther sees this flow of Christ as something anti-natural (a technology, perhaps?). He saw the human body—by natural default—as motivated by lust, seeking pleasures, capable of doing violence to the neighbour. The way this naturalized human body gained access to another “interior” reality, to the divine flow—the *flow of Christ*—was by acknowledging (in radical humility) this fundamentally corrupted character of all bodies. It was at this point, Luther believed, that a person would become aware that he *needed* the flow of Christ, as the generation of a purification process in both mind and body (whereas, for Whitman, the purification of nature was sufficient). Faith, once it became present in the interior of the body, Luther said, ignites a cleansing and “especially its own body shall be purified so that all things may join with it in loving and praising God.”⁵⁹ In this way the violence and damage which the body had the potential to enact would (in the ideal case) be washed away.

Indeed, it was incumbent upon the Christian to manage the body (to govern and discipline it accordingly), “by fastings, watchings, labors, and other reasonable discipline.”⁶⁰ But Luther, who cultivated an appreciation for the affective nature of faith, particular to unique bodies, was confident that “everyone should be able to learn for himself the limit and discretion, as they say, of his bodily castigations, for he will fast, watch, and labor as much as he finds sufficient to repress the lasciviousness and lust of his body.”⁶¹ The easy correlate to this notion in poststructuralist thought is—of course—Michel Foucault’s *governmentality* or *governmentalization*, which was experiencing something of an explosion during Luther’s time in the fifteenth and

⁵⁹ Luther, *Basic Theological Writings*, 611.

⁶⁰ Luther, *Basic Theological Writings*, 610.

⁶¹ Luther, *Basic Theological Writings*, 611.

sixteenth centuries.⁶² In Foucault's definition, government is "the movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth."⁶³ Thus, the *flow of Christ* would be read, in an insubordinating poststructuralist critique, as a subjection of the body to a panoptically present divinity and law. Realistically, it is unlikely that Luther would have agreed. But his sense of the violent capacities of the human body was strong, and this governing flow of Christ was an opportunity, in a sense, to transform the urges of the body into a somewhat abstract neighbor love, which was itself without violence, and was meant to undo violence.

The justification behind this governance was to continue the flow. In other words, the divine flows through Christ, which flows into the human through faith. It was only through such governance and management of the body and its potential violence that love would become manifest among human beings, Luther believed. We govern the body in order to (in a more political sense) materialize love for the neighbor. "A man does not live for himself in this mortal body to work for it alone, but he also lives for all men on earth; rather, he lives only for others and not himself. To this end he brings his body into subjection that he may the more sincerely and freely serve others."⁶⁴ It was in this sacrifice of lusts to the *flow of Christ* that the body was able to give up its abundances to the flow of faith and love, which touched down in the life of the neighbor.

Whitman did not carry this sense of sin and corruption. While his *self* was turned into a poetically idealized image of the American political creature, he did not seek to *governmentalize* or discipline it. Rather, he sought to discipline the American political machine with the free-flowing, fleshy subjectivity of the *self* and its body. Whitman shows a deeper obligation to the construct of the Enlightenment *human* that had developed over the course of modernity than he did to this virtualized symbolic form of Christ. Talal Asad notes that one of the most critical points of distinction between what emerged as a secular worldview (in contrast to the religious) during modernity was its optimistic treatment of the body.

⁶² Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 26.

⁶³ Foucault, *Politics of Truth*, 32.

⁶⁴ Luther, *Basic Theological Writings*, 616.

Where Luther sees the need to implant a governing flow of subjectivity, the subject of modernity assumes that this facet of subjectivity is already in place—that it can go without mention. Instead, “high value is given to the integrity of the body.” Part of the autonomy of the Enlightenment subject is to be able to manage and maintain this bodily integrity according to his own standards of reasonability. “The enjoyment of sexual intercourse,” for example, “is a valued part of being human; anything that interferes with that enjoyment is in some powerful sense inhuman. It therefore becomes a matter of human right and its violation. So there is here both an offense against the physical integrity of the body and (so it is believed) an interference with the subject’s ability to experience ‘full’ sexual intercourse. The human being owns his or her body and has the inalienable right to enjoy it.”⁶⁵

Whitman celebrated the positive pleasures of the body and often avoided talk of suffering or pain. He even asserted that such suffering was entirely apart from the *self* he constructed. “The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of money, or depressions or exaltations, / Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news, / the fitful events; / These come to me days and nights and go from me again, / But they are not the Me myself.”⁶⁶ It is not that Whitman denies the body its suffering. As he walks through the world, taking account of all that exists, asserting that it *too* is part and parcel of his *self*, he cognized plenty of pain. “I am the hounded slave,” he wrote. “I wince at the bite of the dogs, / Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen, / I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinned with the ooze of my skin.”⁶⁷ Whitman’s *self* was proud to be one with this pained human. “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person.”⁶⁸ Yet there is a strangely visual, distant, or *observational* aspect to these portraits of pain. At another point, Whitman found a runaway slave at his door. He invited him into his home and “brought water, and filled a tub for his sweated body and bruised feet.”⁶⁹ Yet here the distinction between poet and pained becomes even more distinct. Whitman

⁶⁵ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular, Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 126.

⁶⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1891–92), 191.

⁶⁷ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 65.

⁶⁸ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 65.

⁶⁹ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 35.

observes a portrait of pain and then illustrates it within his poetics. But Whitman does not speak about the broken cuts and scrapes in his *own* flesh in the same way that he celebrates the smell of his armpit. Pain is always held at arm's length, and the poet quickly reaches in to heal the images he paints before the pain can radiate too deeply into the affective flux of the *poesis*. Corruption of the body is something which is superficial, observed. The notion that this *self* might ever, possibly, exert violence over another body in its rumbling, stumbling, becoming is not part of this cosmology.

Nussbaum notes that in spite of all Whitman's attempts to embrace the fact of mortality, the ultimate incorruptibility of the *self* leaves the poetics a bit flat. In its all-encompassing opposition to any sense of bodily shame, Whitman must make room for some exclusions. "Sometimes the all-encompassing presence of the poet seems to defeat the project," of an all encompassing and erotic compassion. "For he seems so omnipresent, so sure of himself, so all-inclusive, that the realities of need and pain about which he speaks vanish from view. We receive at many moments an impression of self-sufficient and rather complacent egoism, and this certainly subverts the poetic design."⁷⁰ In his mysterious unity of all bodies and all nature, there are still some critical self-concealments which he is enacting. Whitman's poetry has the tendency to deny the "messiness of every life, even while it is the messiness of everyday life that it claims to be loving. The emphasis on mystical erotic experiences of fusion and oneness are a large part of the problem. Bodies don't just fuse. Elbows and knees, and even the genital organs to which Whitman attaches so much importance, tend to get in the way."⁷¹

Ultimately, however, the aims of Whitman's vision are political. His song of *self* was not necessarily intended to be a vision for all times. Rather, it was a contingent theologico-political solution for a particular moment in American political space/time. Working against a theological culture that presented him with an institution and a system he deeply disliked, Whitman was constructive in his response, and made some editorial decisions—some critical exclusions.

His editorial decisions often proved to be liberating—particularly in the context of the developing American modern arts. Isadora Duncan, free-form dancer of the free-flowing body, declared that it was

⁷⁰ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 672.

⁷¹ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 673.

Whitman who facilitated her great spiritual and artistic realization. In her own practice, as she “stripped away the artifices of the ballet, she removed the layers of civilized veneer that had distanced humans from their more vital instincts. Like Whitman’s call to cultivate one’s unadulterated self, the lexicon of her dance signalled a return to more essential human movement.”⁷² This was, perhaps, one of Whitman’s most lasting legacies: the freedom of form.

There have always been those, however, who read Whitman as a bit too frightening, failing to appreciate the flow and flux of his form. Writing in 1916, Augustus Hopkins Strong saw Whitman’s disrespect (or, shall we say, distaste, disregard) for poetic form and meter as a symbolic opportunity to assert his rights without acknowledging any obligation for temperance or restraint. Invoking Whitman’s sheer girth (he was a man of 200 pounds and six feet tall, with an open shirt and exuding hair),⁷³ Strong’s condemnation of Whitman seems to appeal to the often guttural fear (or revulsion) of other bodies that can be ignited when one is keenly aware of another body’s capacity to do violence, and test the physical boundaries of other bodies.

Stringent and reductive as Strong’s condemnation may be, it does serve as something of a reminder. Indeed, the American body politic in all its Whitmanesque and non-Whitmanesque glory has become known worldwide as a self-loving body without restraint, with no apparent boundaries, and with a massive capacity to do violence. It has become difficult for many Americans (both those who read their identities as secular and those who understand themselves to be religious) to deny that the American democratic body can raise a threatening spectre. It has become a body politic with the potential to startle, to frighten, to cause revulsion—in much the way, perhaps, that Whitman’s own big body served to test Strong’s tenacity. This may be a good time to ask: How deeply is this Whitmanesque poetic inscribed in our most religious and irreligious political theologies? Are we still in search of a democratic body politic (or poetic) so deeply attuned to its own penchant for pleasure and enjoyment? Are we committed to a political *poesis* that so easily forgets its own limits and bounds?

⁷² Ruth L. Bohan, “I Sing the Body Electric: Isadora Duncan, Whitman, and the Dance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 181.

⁷³ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *American Poets and Their Theology* (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Griffith and Rowland Press, 1916), 453.