

The significance of death in walt whitman's poetry and prose

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Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was the best fulfiller of his own call for an ‘immenser’ poet who would write ‘great poems of death’ (Democratic Vistas). His poetry, as much as it celebrates and endorses sexual liberation, consciously ‘beat[s] and pound[s] for the dead’. Whitman’s writing on death is conscientiously political, aiming to promote democracy to a disjointed America, ‘a teeming Nation of nations’. Whitman’s vision of death is a seductive one, which levels all of humanity through time and space, giving ‘similitude to all periods and locations and processes’ (Preface to 1855 Leaves of Grass), and Whitman’s death is therefore an egalitarian process. For Whitman, the fear of death is a barrier to progressive society, as it causes people to turn away from the ‘union of the parts of the body’ (1856 letter to Emerson) for fear of damnation in some form of afterlife. This fear can only be overcome by a process of deconceptualisation of the self. That is, by eschewing obsession with the continuity of personal identity (similar to Emerson’s ‘mean egotism’), and instead accepting one’s place in a more profound, universal ‘mass identity’. This acceptance is also the route to a truly democratic state. The successful poet, according to Whitman, should be the consummate example of such self-deconceptualisation. Whitman, as a speaker in his poems, atomises himself to the extent that there is little trace of him as an isolated and whole entity in any of his poems.

Aspiz writes that ‘Walt Whitman is a great poet of the joys of life, but he is equally a great poet of death.’ It seems, however, that Whitman’s success in writing about death is not in spite of his success in writing about ‘the joys of life’, but because of it. Whitman presents life as vivid and intensely pleasurable: ‘My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the

passing of blood and air through my lungs' (' Song of Myself'). This has the effect of throwing death in his poems into relief, accentuating the dialectic between these two forces. Whitman locates his dialectic between life and death in a vast, natural universe, full of eternities and infinities. In ' Song of Myself', Whitman looks out of his ' scuttle' to observe ' multiplied as high as I can cipher edge but the rim of the farther systems. / Wider and wider they spread, expanding, always expanding, / Outward and outward and forever outward.' The infinity of the universe is stressed by Whitman to contextualise his discussion of death, as another eternity existing in a universe of eternities. '[W]hat does eternity indicate?', Whitman ponders in ' Song of Myself', if we as a human race have ' thus far exhausted trillions of winters and summers' and there are sure to be ' trillions ahead' and ' other births' to replace us. By highlighting the presence of eternities and infinities existing around us, Whitman makes death a more comprehensible, or at least a more familiar, subject to the reader.

Whitman draws heavily on nature in his design of immortality. Michael Moon observes that, in Whitman's poetry, ' death is...a recurrent phase in the flowings and ebbings of a generally reconstructed nature' (1991). Whitman notices nature's cyclical rejuvenations in his poetry: ' ever-returning spring', ' lilac blooming perennial' and the rain which ' eternal...rise[s] impalpable out of the land and the bottomless sea, / Upward to heaven, whence, vaguely form'd, altogether changed, and yet the same, ...forever, by day and night, [it] give[s] back life to my own origin'. The poet then extrapolates these observances of nature and applies them to human mortality. Given

that ' all else [is] continuing, the stars shining, / The winds blowing, the notes of the bird continuous echoing' (' Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'), then the spirit of humanity, according to Whitman, must logically continue also, and not be truncated by death.

There is a distinct element of eroticism in Whitman's vision of death. It goes without saying that much of Whitman's poetry is steeped with eroticism, and has a strong focus on ' the procreant urge of the world'. Whitman makes an effort, however, not to create a concrete boundary between sex (' the living') and death, but instead often puts them in apposition to one another, for example in ' Song of Myself': ' Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.'. Here the two traditionally opposing concepts are brought into close proximity. Such pairing is also found in ' Scented Herbage of my Breast' where ' love' and ' death' are said to be ' folded inseparably together' and the question is posed: ' what indeed is finally beautiful except death and love?' Eroticism, then, imbues Whitman's vision of death. In ' The Sleepers', the poet ' call[s]' on ' darkness' (a representation of death) who arrives, and promptly ' take[s] the place of [her] lover'. In an settling subversion of expectations the speaker prefers the ' darkness': ' you are gentler than my lover, his flesh was sweaty and panting'. The element of eroticism is continued in ' The Sleepers' in the line, ' the sleepers are very beautiful as they lie unclothed'. Whitman's conscious decision to render ' the sleepers' naked indicates a decisive erotic element to death, which pervades Whitman's poetry.

The presence of eroticism in Whitman's poetic deaths carries through into a certain quality of sensuality/aesthetic appeal in the passages concerned. Havelock Ellis postulates that Whitman 'aspires to reveal the loveliness in death'. The term 'loveliness' is inaccurate for the exact presentation of death that Whitman hopes to achieve: that of death as 'exhilarating' ('Scented Herbage of my Breast'). In 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' the sea 'lisp'd' the 'low and delicious word death' in 'hissing melodious tones'. Here, death – the concept and the very word itself – are made to seem sensually attractive to the reader. In 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd', death is even more explicitly seductive. It is 'lovely and soothing' and 'undulate[s] round the word' with 'sure-enwinding arms'. Indeed, the speaker is 'laved in the flood of [death's] bliss' – which is disconcertingly similar to the erotic description of the 'young men' who 'souse' the speaker with 'spray' in 'Song of Myself'.

Descriptions of death, according to Whitman, demand a certain 'serenity or majesty' (Preface to 1855 Leaves of Grass), and this is just what he provides them with. Most strikingly, in 'The Sleepers', a drowning is described in overwhelmingly aesthetic terms:

'The slapping eddies are spotted with his blood, they bear him away, they roll him, swing him, turn him, / His beautiful body is borne in the circling eddies, it is continually bruis'd on rocks, / Swiftly and out of sight is borne the brave corpse.'

It is clear, then, that Whitman did not view death as something morbid, and completely other to the pleasure of life. Instead, he equated it on some level with sex, in terms of the exhilaration it can provide.

The fear of death, a form of repression directly related to sexual embarrassment in Whitman's poetry, is a force which stunts the process of a progressive society and acts as a barrier to democracy. In *Democratic Vistas* Whitman summarises this 'shuddering at death' as one of the 'low, degrading views' that presently 'rule the spirit pervading society'. Because individuals are so 'rule[d]' by their fear of death, and preoccupied by the existence (or non-existence) of an afterlife, they avoid earthly pleasures in order to gain themselves a place in some hypothetical heaven. This leads to the 'lack of an avowed, empowered, unabashed development of sex' which Whitman highlighted as being essential in a letter to Emerson (1856). Social castes, the enemy of democracy, are created not only on the basis of a hierarchy of 'sinful' to 'Godly', but also due to a forgetfulness of the uniting qualities of the human race. Sex reminds us that we are all part of a 'procession' of animals. Indeed, Whitman looks to animals for an alternative to this repressing state of fear. In 'Song of Myself' he admires how animals 'do not sweat and whine about their condition, / They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins' nor do they spend their time 'discussing their duty to God'. This is the disinterested attitude towards death that Whitman wished America to reach.

Whitman offers, in himself, an alternative to such a state of fear. He bravely proclaims that 'the churches are one vast lie' (letter to Emerson 1856) and

states that 'no array of terms can say how much [he is] at peace about God and about death'. Death, cannot 'alarm' him. Whitman achieves this attitude by not dwelling on the unknowns after death (he cannot answer this question), and instead living for the present. 'Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave' should 'know he has enough' ('The Sleepers'), because simply being 'surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh' is enough ('I Sing the Body Electric').

Death serves a democratic function for Whitman. Death is, in Aspiz' words: 'a vital component of [Whitman's] gospel of universal brotherhood and sisterhood [democracy]'. America, in Whitman's mind, was a fractured 'nation of many nations' that needed to be made 'indissoluble' ('For You O Democracy) through democracy. Death, in Whitman's poetry works as a tool of democracy in two key ways. The first method by which death can have a democratic impact is more literal. In 'Death of Abraham Lincoln' Whitman writes: 'the grand deaths of the race – the dramatic deaths of every nationality – are its most important inheritance-value', suggesting that the death of an individual can have great political repercussions. This thought is then expanded and clarified as Whitman writes that 'one man's life' was the catalyst for the 'terminus of the secession war' and the 'seal of the emancipation of three million slaves'. Therefore, in this poem, Whitman's imagining of the death of Abraham Lincoln, democracy, the 'genuine homogenous Union' is seen to arise from the death of one man.

There is a second, more nuanced way in which democracy springs from death. Men are united by their mortality, and death is a force that renders

individuals classless. Whitman stresses that all humans, whether they are 'the meanest on in the laborer's gang' or one of the 'dull-face immigrants', have their place in 'the procession' ('I Sing the Body Electric'). By this he means the homogenous and, to his mind, eternal continuation of humanity: 'The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion'. Because all men are not just solitary selves but the continuation of and future potential for the eternal stream of the human race, this levels each individual's value. As such, one should not place 'a man's body at auction' (i. e. in the slave trade) because 'whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it, / For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant, / For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd.'. Each person alive is the product of 'quintillions of years' of progression. Moreover, each person alive is universalised temporally and spatially: women and men are 'exactly the same to all, in all nation and times, all over the earth'. Death homogenises us; in death 'the stammerer, the sick, the perfect-form'd, the homely...the criminal...the fluent lawyers' are 'likened' ('The Sleepers').

In order to spurn the fear of death, and to accept the democratic nature of death, a large hurdle must first be overcome. Namely, the deconceptualisation of the self. To accept one's temporal and spatial continuity of identity, one must accept that the self is not necessarily an entity, 'I'. This idea is explored in section 6 of 'Song of Myself' in which the speaker states 'What do you think has become of the young and old men? / And what do you think has become of the women and children? / They are

alive and well somewhere, / The smallest sprout shows there is really no death'. This again has the speaker observing nature – 'the smallest sprout' – and generalising this to humanity. As long as 'young and old men' and 'women and children' exist somewhere: both in temporal and spatial planes, then 'all goes onward and outward, nothing collapses'. This idea is developed in 'One the Beach at Night Alone'. The poet details 'a vast similitude [which] interlocks all', claiming that this similitude hold together 'all identities that have existed or may exist on this globe, or any globe, / All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future'. Again, Whitman is seen to break down the linearity of time to create an eternity that functions on the same plane as the infiniteness of space. Aspiz writes that Whitman does 'not view [death] as a total cessation of personal identity' (2004), but this reading is not quite nuanced enough. Whitman does accept the sacrifice of personal identity, but transfigures it instead into a form of democratic mass identity.

The posthumous transfiguration of personal identity into mass identity is clear in 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry'. In this poem a disembodied speaker observes passengers 'cross[ing] from shore to shore' and has a sense of 'certainty' in their 'life, love, sight, hearing'. The speaker is confident that his personal identity, his past experiences are being continued in a form of mass identity, through the experiences of others. The speaker sees this situation stretching far into the future, toward eternity: 'Others will see the islands large and small; / Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross... A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them'. Most important is not what the passengers 'see' but that they feel

the same way too (' Just as you feel... so I felt'). The continuity of mass identity is also described in terms of species continuation. In ' Ages and Ages Returning at Intervals', the speaker, a ' chanter of Adamic songs' wanders ' immortal' with ' the potent original loins', ready continue the identity of the human race. This idea is clarified in ' I sing the Body Electric'. In the poem, Whitman explains that no man is ' only one man' but rather ' the father of those who shall be fathers in their turn' so that each man is ' the start of populous states and rich republics' and of ' countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and enjoyments'. Woman, too, is ' not only herself, she is the teeming mother of mother's'. In this way, identity is continued throughout generations, as the human species is maintained. This idea is again linked to a democratic sentiment as there is no way of knowing ' who shall come from the offspring of [a man's] offspring through the centuries?' nor do we know who we have derived from, if one were to ' trace back through centuries' (I Sing the Body Electric).

The concept of reincarnation is important in Whitman's vision of death. In ' Song of Myself' Whitman questions: ' To be in any form, what is that?' immediately following this query with the parenthetical statement '(round and round we go, all of us, and ever come back thither)'. It is clear that the idea of reincarnation, as a way of overcoming the issues posed by the concept of identity continuation after death, interested Whitman. This frame of mind allows the speaker, later on in the poem, to '[believe] I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years', which liberates him from the concerns of chastising his mortal flesh in order to attain a place in some

heaven. Because the speaker has ' No doubt I have died...ten thousand times before', he is not afraid of death.

Identity continuity after death is not, however, an uncontested idea in Whitman's poetry. In ' Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances' the speaker worries that ' may-be identity beyond the grave is a beautiful fable only'. It is clear here, and more widely throughout Whitman's writing that he is not entirely sure on his standpoint of what happens after death, merely emphasising the importance of enjoying life. Whitman ' cannot answer the question of...identity beyond the grave', but regardless he is ' indifferent' and ' satisfied': an attitude toward death that he advocates to the reader.

The poet's continuity of identity is particularly intriguing in Whitman's poems. Whitman, the speaker, seems to be atomised: diffused completely across time and space. He is present at the loading of the ' slow-drawn wagon' at ' harvest-time', ' stretch'd atop of the load'; he is ' handcuff'd' next to the ' mutineer'; he lies ' gasp[ing]' next to the ' cholera patient'; he even embodies the ' shroud in the coffin. Like a pantheistic God, Whitman ' effuse[s]' and ' merge[s]' himself into everything. He has the ability to ' loosen' himself and ' pass freely' (' I Sing the Body Electric'). Whitman has been liberated from the incarcerations of the body, and from bodily mortifications and fears. As a result, ' nothing can jar him...death and fear cannot' (Preface to 1855 ' Leaves of Grass'). In making the defiant proclamation against death: ' I exist as I am, that is enough', Whitman shows that fear of death can be overcome through self-deconceptualisation.

In Whitman's poetry and prose, death is presented as ' sane and sacred', a democratic force that homogenises humanity of time and space. However, fear of death functions as a form of repression, that hinders on from enjoying life encouraging us instead to turn to chastising forms of religion in the hope that this will guarantee us a place in heaven. In order to fully access the benefits of death, an individual must deconceptualise themselves, accepting their part in the wider ' procession' of humanity, and being satisfied that their identity will find continuity after their deaths in the eternal mass identity of the species. Whitman, as a speaker in his poems is ' disintegrated' and yet ' part of the scheme' (' Crossing Brooklyn Ferry'), allowing him both to deconceptualise himself but also to write active poetry. The atomisation of the poet is the consummate transcendence, and allows Whitman to achieve ' the finest blending of individuality with universality' (' The Bible as Poetry') which is conducive to the production of a democratic state.