Walt whitman and the divine average: "starting from paumanok” in context

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When one considers the word ‘ divine,’ the next word that comes to mind is not naturally ‘ average.’ Something divine is holy, otherworldly, and godlike – the exact antithesis of something average. Why, then, in his poem “ Starting from Paumanok,” does Walt Whitman combine these antonyms and proudly declare, “ O, divine average!” (Whitman)? This divergence from the popular interpretation of the word ‘ divine’ provides readers insight to Whitman’s understanding of the world: Whitman saw divinity in everything, from the awesome power of the cosmos to something as average as a blade of grass.

Unlike “ Starting from Paumanok,” Whitman’s poem “ Song of Myself” says nothing about “ divine average.” Upon first reading “ Song of Myself,” one might assume Walt Whitman believed divine forces – that is, a godly force – existed exclusively within him. The poem is saturated with religious imagery, most of which puts the narrator, presumably Whitman himself, in the shoes of God. One of the most breathtaking examples of this inflates Whitman to an inhuman scale: “ I travel…. I sail…. my elbows rest in the sea-gaps, / I skirt the sierras…. my palms cover continents” (Whitman, Reynolds 23). Other lines liken Whitman to a sacrificial Christ figure – one who sees pain in others and accepts it as his own or, in other examples, supports other men and women with his supernatural strength. “ To any one dying,” he writes, “ I dilate you with tremendous breath… I buoy you up” (Whitman, Reynolds 35). Phrases like these imply Whitman considered himself to be similar to – if not the embodiment of – God and Jesus Christ. He believed himself to be divine.

The word ‘ divine’ is derived from the Latin divus, which has a similar origin as deus, or God (Emily Dickinson Lexicon). The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘ divine,’ then, as “ Of or pertaining to God or a god” (“ Divine”).

Webster's 1828 dictionary offers a broader, yet equally powerful, definition: " Godlike… apparently above what is human" (Emily Dickinson Lexicon). Regardless of definition, the word ' divine' carries heavy connotations – thoughts of noble kings, wise soothsayers, and pious clergymen often come attached to the word. So when Walt Whitman – a poet, not a king – writes lines like, " Divine I am inside and out" (Whitman, Reynolds 17), it is easy to dismiss his claims as the products of rampant egotism.

This apparent egotism extends beyond religious imagery. Phrases like " I celebrate myself" (Whitman, Reynolds 1) and " I dote on myself" (Whitman, Reynolds 18) might easily be construed as arrogant. However, nowhere did Whitman claim to be the only one with divine features that deserve to be celebrated. In fact, he explicitly wrote that God is within all persons: " In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass" (Whitman, Reynolds 42). The most direct definition of Whitman's religious beliefs might be that he saw the divine in the abstract human self – something that belongs to every living person.

If ' divine' means to be " above what is human," how is it possible every man and woman can carry such a powerful label? The answer might lay in the theology of deism, a set of beliefs that influenced Whitman's life and writing (Pettinger). Deists often reject the beliefs of most organized religions, instead seeing God and divine forces through nature and human reason (Emily Dickinson Lexicon). In his research about deism, Peter Byrne wrote, " The link between the mind and God is strengthened through the thought that the existence and content of natural instinct makes us partakers in God's

nature" (Byrne 33). Perhaps this statement, that human reason is God's work, might explain Whitman's belief that we are all divine.

Take Webster's 1844 dictionary definition of ' divine:' " Pertaining to the true God; as, the divine nature; divine perfections" (Emily Dickinson Lexicon). Considering the revivalist America in which this dictionary entry was written, it is fair to assume " the true God" is that from Christian tradition. In fact, most popular uses of the word ' divine' – divine right, divine providence, divine law – at least connote organized religion, if not Christianity specifically. Whitman, however, did not identify as a Christian (Pettinger). Perhaps it is ignorant, then, to analyze Whitman's use of ' divine' from the angle Webster's 1844 dictionary offers. Perhaps, to a man who did not subscribe to traditional religious beliefs, the word ' divine' meant something entirely different than its dictionary definitions.

In " Starting from Paumanok," Whitman used the word ' divine' four times, all of which are incongruous with Webster's definition. " Eternal progress," he wrote, " the kosmos, and the modern reports. This, then, is life… Underfoot the divine soil – overhead the sun" (Whitman). Notice how Whitman did not describe the sun, something humans have worshipped since the dawn of mankind, as divine, but instead gave the label to measly soil. Later in " Starting from Paumanok," Whitman used the phrase, " O divine average!" in a section describing not only the power of religion, love, and democracy, but also the simple pleasures of " a daily kiss" (Whitman). According to Whitman, divinity is not exclusively reserved for the largest forces in our universe – God, the " kosmos," or love – but for things as seemingly insignificant as the soil.

What, then, does it mean to be divine? Is a bean plant as powerful as a human, and is a blade of grass as consequential to the universe as the sun is? Whitman seems to have carelessly thrown around the word in his writing. These examples from “ Starting from Paumanok” even clash with the principles of deism; Peter Byrne wrote about the divinity of human reason, not dirt.

If the Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘ divine’ as “ pertaining to God,” and if Whitman believed everything in the natural world came from a god, it makes sense that he considered soil to be divine. This explains his repeated, nearly casual, use of the word, and his belief that everything is divine. Divinity cannot be measured; one either has it or not, and, according to Walt Whitman, everything in the universe is divine.

In “ Song of Myself,” Whitman wrote, “ Do I guess I have some intricate purpose? Well I have… for the April rain has, and the mica on the side of a rock has” (Whitman, Reynolds 13). Later he mused, “ I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars” (Whitman, Reynolds 22). Divinity and significance are not synonyms, but to Whitman, it seems the two are interchangeable. To him, everything was created for a specific and important purpose, and to remove even one element from the universe would create chaos. Perhaps a blade of grass is not as big or complex or smart as a human brain, but the same supernatural force created both, and therefore both are indispensible to the universe.

A modern reader can only imagine how offensive this theory must have been to the puritan America to which it was presented. Patrick Henry, who died

twenty years before Whitman’s birth, once said about deism, – a philosophy that is, arguably, a more watered-down version of Whitman’s personal theology – “ our country… is greatly tarnished by the general prevalence of deism, which, with me, is but another name for vice and depravity” (Emily Dickinson Lexicon). Imagine Henry’s reaction to Whitman lines like “ If I worship any particular thing it shall be some of the spread of my body” (Whitman, Reynolds 18) or “ nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s-self is” (Whitman, Reynolds 41). Religious readers must have thought Whitman’s poetry – full of imagery that likened himself to God and claims of personal divinity – to be offensive to their puritan sensibilities.

Whitman’s use of the word ‘ divine’ was not accidental. It is a complicated word, and one that may have several different definitions depending on whom is asked. Consider, again, the phrase, “ O divine average!” A devoted Christian, for example, may think it is blasphemous to use a word so associated with God to describe mundanity; whereas a nonreligious person may interpret the quote in a completely different manner. We, as readers, must ignore our own backgrounds and biases when interpreting a text, else risk misunderstanding an author’s entire message.

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