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**Body as a Site of Entanglement: Being and Becoming in
Whitman’s “Song of Myself”**

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Abstract: Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” situates itself in the American literary canon as one of the most widely debated and philosophically radical poems. Its celebratory address to the self, the body, and its possible inferences has invited sustained critical attention from diverse literary traditions. The paper integrates insights from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodiment, Gaston Bachelard’s poetics of space and imagination, and an ecocritical perspective grounded in the work of Buell and Morton to articulate the body as a site of entanglement navigating through a reciprocal becoming. The discourse on body gets problematised when it is read in tandem with these overlapping frameworks, only to further reinstate that Whitman’s corporeal poetics opens up a vicissitude of possibilities where the boundaries of the self and the other gets negotiated. The study explores how Whitman’s poem celebrates the body because it is irreducibly multiple- social and solitary, simultaneously embodied in a blade of grass and again dispersed into the immense cosmos.

Keywords: *Body, Poetics, Space, Possibilities, Entanglement*

Introduction

Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself", first published as the opening poem of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and revised across six subsequent editions until 1891-92, occupies a crucial position in American literary history tradition that is at once canonical and perpetually unsettled. It is perpetually unsettled in the sense that "the poem was intended to have as many structures as there were readers; and the reason was that Whitman aimed not simply to create a poet and then a god, but to assist at the creation of the poetic and godlike in every reader" (Bloom 68). This orchestrated ambiguity extends far beyond the relationship between the author and the reader.

Walt Whitman, however, in his "Song of Myself" lends a polyphonic sensibility to the recurring 'I'. But the poem becomes centrally paradoxical in that it simultaneously celebrates democracy and individualism. As much as critics have focussed on the problems, it is needless to mention that this has stirred up debates about the multidimensional perspectives towards understanding of the self as opposed to a one-directional projection of the same.

The critical reception of Whitman's "Song of Myself" remains a site of perpetual inquiry as it oscillates between the canonical status of American individualism and exploring the symbiosis of self and the place. The dialogue surrounding Whitman's corporeal poetics has taken a turn toward examining such permeable boundaries. The methodology of this paper involves a multidisciplinary theoretical triangulation that integrates phenomenology, spatial poetics, and material ecocriticism to analyse the intertextual layers of the poem. Through recurring images such as grass, movement, and dispersal, Whitman constructs a corporeal poetics that is simultaneously multitudinous, sensory, and ecological. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how "Song of Myself" envisions embodiment as multiple, permeable, and deeply entangled with the material cosmos.

The methodological frameworks serve as an interconnected conceptual continuum. Our consciousness both projects the things of the world and is at the same time subjected to the world by the very nature of existence. The poem's lyrical 'I' is "constantly in sensuous contact with the world" (Syvertsen 23). It was Maurice Merleau-Ponty who prefigured that the flesh is the elemental connective tissue that binds the seer and the visible, the tactile and the tangible, the sentient and the sensible. Phenomenology provides the vocabulary to realise that "we ourselves, qua bodily, are nature" (Garrard 283).

In "Song of Myself," space is relational in the sense that relationships are constantly being negotiated, contested. It is also about taking into account how spaces are repositories of lived imagination. The 'political nature of this embodied act of place-making' (Aiyadurai 3) invites us to question how the

body expresses and situates itself. The speaker's spatial trajectory functions as a deliberate re-mapping of the American landscape.

This broader focus on embodiment and human-ecological relation has become crucial in addressing the bigger questions facing the globe today. This goes beyond saying that in this context, the category of the human itself demands enough interrogation. The visceral dimensions in a broader expanse become sites of contemplation. Significantly, the relationship between the human-subject and the world "is an ambiguous one, between beings who are both embodied and limited and an enigmatic world of which we catch a glimpse but only ever from points of view that hide as much as they reveal" (Davis et al. 54). Spaces are political, and every act of translating space is also a process of rewriting what it alienates and delineates in the ongoing process of signification.

Literature Review

As many critics have pointed out, Whitman positions the human body in terms of horizontal and vertical axes. He incidentally conceives a horizontal positioning of the body to be associated with birth and death and describes the nondemocratic and more personally meaningful vertical orientation as the "middle" (Hagood 25) of the body and of life. Everybody on earth is equal when arranged horizontally, notwithstanding their vertical positioning.

Understanding Whitman's conception of the self becomes crucial to comprehending his paradox. Mark Maslan has commented on this division in Whitman's poetical rhetoric: "Rethinking division in this manner-as enabling rather than debilitating-would involve re-examining a whole series of relationships in Whitman in which critics have seen union as the organizing principle: the relationship between body and soul, body and text, form and content, man and man, people and government. And, of course, it would involve reassessing Whitman's view of Union itself. This task remains for future studies" (Hagood 26).

Whitman presents a divided identity in which the self is seen as opposed to the individual. The very first sentence, "I celebrate myself," (Whitman 30) reveals this division. Whitman uses the act of celebration and, in later versions of the poem, singing to bridge the gap between the objectified 'I' and the objectified 'myself'. In this illustration, the body serves as the central space, with the head and feet representing the two ends of a consolidated unit. As humans are positioned vertically, the head becomes the furthest point from contact with the earth, making these contact points crucial. Feet are the point of contact between humans and the real world.

Critics as Taylor Hagood have brought out the concept of "middleness" (27) through the line: "But I do not talk of the beginning or the end" (Whitman 31). His understanding of the 'kelson' too exemplifies

the sense of 'horizontalness' that predominates in the poem (Hagood 27): "And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers, / And that a kelson of the creation is love" (Whitman 34).

The image of grass seeks to convey "boundlessness and democracy and horizontalness" (Hagood 27) that Whitman had wished to establish. "Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones," (Whitman 35) grass is oblivious to the crude divisions race, class, and tribe: "growing among black folks as among white, / Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same" (Whitman 35).

Whitman, as Kuniko Yoshizaki (43) points out, uses grass "as a motif of life-death-rebirth," a notion supported by the geological model in which dead horizontal strata in the earth's strata give rise to vertical elements of life, such as human beings who eventually die and rest in a new layer of horizontal strata to start the process anew. It is prominent in the following lines from the poem:

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.
Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them;
It may be you are from old people and from women, and from offspring taken soon
out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.....
I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
.....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,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.
All goes onward and outward, and nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier (Whitman 36).

Grass, with its vertical orientation, symbolizes the individual, but it also depicts the multitude because of its horizontal dispersion. Death, the final and irreversible horizontal orientation, acts as a leveller. ‘Democracy’ is personified. It moves “onward and outward” (Whitman 36) in such a manner that its strength expands without disrupting anything.

In section five of the poem, bodily horizontality and its connecting points-the feet and hair-occur in an equally noticeable way. The poet idles away on the grass, adopting a posture where no single body part dominates the point of touch between the individual and the diverse ground. Whitman emphasizes the image's democratic equality in his: "I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other" (34). He again writes: "I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning/ How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me, / And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart, / And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet" (34).

Complete encirclement of the body and, hence, total connectivity are indicated by reaching from one extremity to the other along the lines of horizontalness. Given the significance of feet and hair, the poem's last lines have an especially noteworthy physical meaning:

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
 I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.
 I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
 If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.
 You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,.....
 Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
 Missing me one place search another,... (Whitman 93)

The confined and split human form of Whitman nearly seems to disperse into the air in these last lines. Whitman, in fact, depicts himself as follows in one of his critiques of his own work: “..of American breed, of reckless health, his body perfect, free from taint from top to toe...beard short and well mottled with white, hair like hay after it has been mowed in the field and lies tossed and streaked ... a face that absorbs the sunshine and meets savage or gentleman on equal terms-a face of one who eats and drinks and is a brawny lover and embracer-a face of undying friendship and indulgence toward men and women, and of one who finds the same returned many fold ... a spirit that mixes cheerfully with the world” (Hagood 32).

Carnavalesque celebrations often involve a temporary suspension of social norms, including those related to sexuality. Whitman's celebration of the body can be seen as a form of eroticism that challenges the repressive sexual attitudes of his time. The poem explores the body's sensuality and challenges traditional moral boundaries.

For critics like Hagood, Whitman's portrayal of the body in its raw and unfiltered form aligns with the carnivalesque idea of the body as a site of freedom and liberation (30). His creative projection of the body can also be seen as an act of countering the reality of the world. His multitudinous vision, where all individuals are celebrated and valued, resonates with the carnivalesque spirit of overturning hierarchies. Hagood mentions: "the poem's sweeping, horizontally-arranged lines and struggle for common, visceral language characterize an effort to create and perpetuate a peculiar unification of the individual and the many in an America constantly moving onward and outward" (32).

Reading the body through these intersecting frameworks complicates any fixed understanding of corporeality. Whitman's poetics consequently reimagines the self as relational, fluid, and open to continual negotiation with the other.

Spatial Imagination and Poetic Becoming

The social dimension of the body is again inextricably linked to the sensory experiences, which is best illuminated through Ponty's phenomenological understanding. The body, therefore, becomes the primary site of perception and "perception is the ongoing transcendence, the ecstatic nature of the living body" (Abram 103). The locus in question shifts from the "abstracted, transcendent capacity of the intellect" (Syvertsen 24) to what Ponty calls the 'body-subject' (Abram 103). This rootedness is evident in Whitman's figuration of the self. The self exists because it is inherently fragmentary and dismantles itself every time it engages in the act of perception.

The corporeal self is present in the "play of shine and shade on the trees", "the rush of the streets", "along the fields and hill-sides" and in the elusive materiality of a song that anticipates "meeting the sun" (Whitman 31). The speaker expresses humility through and because of his sensory encounters and urges the readers towards an acceptance of the "messiness of the experiential" (Ahmed 30) in the following lines:

"You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self." (Whitman 31)

Abram went on to write: "To the student of perception, the phenomenon of depth is the original ambiguity: it is depth that provides the slack or play in the immediately perceived world, the instability

that already calls upon the freedom of the body to engage, to chose, to focus the world long before any verbal reflection comes to thematize and appropriate that freedom as its own” (103). The speaker of the poem remains conscious of the constant negotiation of the self which again constitutes the relationship of the perceiving body to the world.

In light of this, Weber writes, “Poetic language allows us to systematically express our relationship with the world and with one another” (134). In the poem, the speaker doesn’t inhabit a specific locale, rather the body traverses through various landscapes and responds to the vulnerability of the lived experience. “Song of Myself” abounds with such references configuring “the drama of contingency” (Ahmed 5):

I fly those flights of a fluid and swallowing soul,
My course runs below the soundings of plummets.

I help myself to material and immaterial,
No guard can shut me off, no law prevent me (Whitman 67).

Whitman here, seems to actively practice this intimate immensity of freedom. Poetic images, when contemplated, contribute to a universal expanse which is why the blade of grass moves us to an unimaginable depth. Bachelard spoke of poetry “as the phenomenon of freedom” (Jolas 27). In another instance, the speaker of Whitman’s poem sets out to define his immediate environment through some personal, physical, cultural and ideological demarcations only to re-assert later that: “But they are not the Me myself” (Whitman 33). So, in the very rendering of a sense of home, there’s enough “psychological elasticity” (Jolas 6) which facilitates a shift in consciousness from the microscopic to the telescopic. The ambitious rhetoric of filling in missing links and bringing together the horizontal openness of the earth and the vertical aspiration of the living thing takes us back to some fundamental self-questioning, namely, who are ‘we’ exactly?

Bachelard further reinstates that “phenomenology of the imagination cannot be content with a reduction which would make the image a subordinate means of expression: it demands, on the contrary, that images be lived directly, that they be taken as sudden events in life. When the image is new, the world is new” (Jolas 18). The speaker of Whitman’s poem vehemently posits that he is the “mate and companion of people, all just as immortal/ and fathomless as myself,” (Whitman 36) but this kind of immortality and fathomlessness stems from a knowledge that “the metaphysical is contingent upon the physical” (Syvertsen 31). The self here is not obligated to an immanent presence anticipating

its transcendence rather it “witnesses and waits” (Whitman 33); its subjectivity is derived from the “material body’s being-in-the-world” (Syvertsen 31).

Embodiment and Entanglement: Permeable Boundaries

For Weber, “subjectivity is a biological driving force” (77), an evolutionary impulse that probes the organism to intermingle with the objective world. Whitman’s democratic vision was indeed historically contingent, but also something that carried a tendency towards a way of becoming. An organism can be regarded as a kind of “ecosystem” (Weber 26) materially embedded in a kind of “referential totality” (Heidegger 105). The speaker of “Song of Myself” speaks of an evaluative framework where “bodies move through space and are affected by the ‘where’ of that movement” (Ahmed 53):

Do I contradict myself?
 Very well then I contradict myself,
 (I am large, I contain multitudes) (Whitman 92).

Reading Whitman is a geopoetical act and allow us beyond all doubt to “think past Nature” (Morton 5). Whitman’s deistic worldview paradigm was again very incidental to the narrative of democratic rooting and therefore might seem anachronistic while contextualising him in “an age of mass extinction” (Morton 1) where things are already at work and “spread out over time” (Morton 69) to elude our sensory parameters.

The speaker asks, “have you reckon’d the earth much?” (Whitman 31). Such rhetoric maps out the emergent possibilities of ‘co-constitutive becoming’ (Aiyadurai 5). The question of embodiment arises as a crucial component for the conception of ecology. Low explains ‘embodied space’ as something akin to multidisciplinary construction in the anthropological process of ‘place-making’ by way of ‘focus on bodies as they create space through mobility and movement’ (16). Understanding Whitman’s “the procreant urge of the world” (32) as enabling a “non-hierarchised, flat and relational ontology of ethos” (Aiyadurai 4) :

I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured
 and never will be measured.
 I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!) (Whitman 86).

Syvertsen writes, “The permeable bodies present in ‘Song of Myself’ present an epitomized democratic worldview, in which it is impossible to account for the human body without recognizing its interrelations with the more-than-human-world” (42). Wood further illustrates how a “naturalization of

consciousness” necessitates an expanded understanding of the natural itself (Garrard 288). Recognising and cohabiting such spaces of sensory relationality forms the “core of ecological sensibilities” (Aiyadurai 56). Bennett also comments that “to be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and every day” (4). Valuing such moments again “enhances the prospect of ethical engagement” (Aiyadurai 63).

Conclusion

For Whitman, the self remained a part of an extended ecological family. The spaces Whitman confronts are ultimately the spaces the poem negotiates into being. In this reference, Morton argues: “Things are a kind of liminal space made of other things. Art happens in and is this liminal space, this between, which is just what a thing is: a meeting place of other beings (“thing” is Old English for “meeting place”). This meeting place is not ontically given or, in other words, metaphysically (constantly) present. Rather, it is slot through and through with nothingness” (Iovino 279).

If the poem felt perpetually unsettling, it is also because it resists any definite truths. Such environmental ethical readings make us confront the “unpremeditated sensible world” which awakens in us “biophilic feelings, precisely because we have a common origin with the elements of nature” (Aiyadurai 60). This ‘ecological being-together’ opens before us “the affective possibilities of nurture and care” (Aiyadurai 2). Whitman’s corporeal poetics ultimately refuses fixed boundaries between self and world. The body in “Song of Myself” emerges not as a closed entity but as a dynamic process of ecological and democratic becoming, continually dispersing itself into wider networks of human and more-than-human relationality.

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