

De-capitalizing the “I”:  
Worlds both Inner and Shared in the Whitmanian Lyric

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## INTRODUCTION

When critics and scholars attempt to define the lyric as entirely individual—a prison song overheard—or social—a “privileging of the political over the private spheres” (Dubrow 120)—one risks overlooking the nuanced way in which the lyric poem behaves, overlooking the novel interaction between first-person declaratives, the exchange of “I’s: between the poet and his audience. What would it be to consider the genre of lyric a dream world of exchange, an economy of “I’s”?

The ancient critic Proclus divided Hellenistic lyric poetry into four subgenres: lyrics addressed to gods, lyrics addressed to men, lyrics addressed to gods and men and, lastly, lyrics for events; however, he eventually “grudgingly” omitted the final category because it was not parallel with the other designations (Johnson 99). His predecessor in the study of lyric genre, Aristophanes, attempted to divide the lyric using categories focused on conventional and formal elements, e.g. length, in order to catalog the collection of ancient lyric poems carried over into the new Roman Empire (Johnson 97). Both of the scholars’ work assisted in reviving interest in ancient Greek lyric among the Roman readership—which was more concerned with victory songs and epic poetry.

Conversely, highlighting one of the adverse effects of cataloging the lyric, Heather Dubrow shares that proponents of Aristotelian categorization of literature, such as George Puttenham in *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), developed “elaborate subdivisions of poetry” that significantly narrowed the concept of the lyric and led to the withholding of that label from some forms of poetry (Dubrow 114). If one defines the lyric as individuated voice, how does one make sense of the Whitmanian lyric that incorporates elements of nationhood, transcendentalism and the fragmented self?

Categories are crucial in assisting scholars and readers make sense of what they read. The renewed interest in Greek poetry by the Romans was in part due to the effect, Johnson believes, familiarization with conventional features has on shifting sensibility and expectation. However, both poetry and poets by the nature of the work defy mimetic interpretation and are often hard to place within rigid categories. Thus, classification in poetry is only as useful as it is malleable. For, one of the great lyric bards of the modern era, Walt Whitman utilizes first-person declaratives as well as narrative and epic elements in a single poem—namely, *A Passage to India*, which is analyzed in Section Two. What is consistent in the Whitmanian lyric is not the sublimation of his social world for the individual but how he uses first-person pronouns to construct a social world in which exile perspectives can be traded—an “I” for an “I”—in a movement toward an ideal, fictional, collective body—in a movement toward transcendence.

Is Whitman, author of *Song of Myself*, no longer considered a lyric poet because some of his work uses second and third person or functions to, what I argue, de-capitalize the “I” by stopping short of full disintegration into the “you” and instead functions to trade places with the audience in the form of new “I’s”? In *Song of Myself*, the poet writes: “ Not a mutineer walks handcuff’d to jail but I am handcuff’d to him and walk by his side, / (I am less the jolly one there, and more the silent one with sweat on my twitching lips.) / Not a youngster is taken for larceny but I go up too, and am tried and sentenced. / Not a cholera patient lies at the last gasp but I also lie at the last gasp” (Whitman 71-72). Only in the world of illusion does the poet entertain the notion that “I” can become “you.” Thus, in the above passage, the poet settles for trading his self (his “I”) for his countrymen’s.

Further analogy between the poet lending out his “I” and the transcendentalist call to walk out into nature can illuminate how de-capitalization occurs in Whitmanian lyric poetry. In

the process of de-capitalization, first-person pronouns are no longer solely referential to the poet; they enter into possession of both the speaker and the audience through barter. In this dream world of the lyric, the poet and the audience recreate one another ad infinitum: the town crier becomes the baby, the lover; the Roman becomes the monk.

Thoreau, one of the leading proponents of transcendentalism, in his essay *Walking* describes being transported in an enchanted state to the Middle Ages where he walks as a Roman, on “his bridges rebuilt by his heroes”—bridges that remain subject to the swamp, the primitive forest where he finds sanctuary (Thoreau 16). Here, Thoreau shares his prison song where release from civilization, where the key to his chamber is in a dream world in which he trades bodies with the ancients:

I floated under the spell of enchantment, as if I had been transported to a heroic age, and breathed an atmosphere of chivalry...The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world...Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps...When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place—a sanctum sanctorum...The civilized nations-Greece, Roman, England are sustained by the primitive forests which anciently rotted where they stand. (Thoreau 16)

Although this is from an essay, it has the lyric quality of personal lament, which in the above case is directed at the speed and scale of industrialization in a new America. Whitman, who explicitly responded to the transcendentalist question regarding where was the American poet who could lament for a nation losing its forests, takes up the call to trade his cry (“I”) for his countrymen’s inarticulate whimper.

Thoreau and Emerson, both essayists of the Concord transcendentalist tradition, greatly influenced the writings of Whitman—particularly Emerson, to whom the core tenets of transcendentalism are credited. Emerson spoke of the individual's “revelation” or “intuition” being primary—a perspective that challenged monolithic thinking and religious doctrine (Emerson 5). Transcendentalists believed intuition was best developed in nature away from civilization. The lyric quality in transcendentalist writing that expresses an exchange of “I’s” is found in Emerson’s euphuistic description of an experience in the woods, Emerson writes, “I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the universal being circulate through me.” (Emerson 6). The woods often associated with fairytales and dream worlds, function as a poem would in setting the intimate conditions for an economy of “I” trading: The writer becomes the bird; the vagabond becomes the antelope. In the preface of his second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman published a “Dear Master” letter to Emerson, “calling for identity, for national character, and individuality” (Whitman xxxii). Thus, one could argue, from the initiation of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman intended to craft a lyric that was socially referential.

Whitman’s work represents a particular first-person poetry that does not eschew the social—one that might have been discredited by the narrow definitions of critics such as Puttenham. As a gesture to the reader, the speaker in Whitmanian lyric lends out his first-person pronouns as a bridge or channel—like Thoreau’s bridge to Rome—through which the reader can enter his prison song. For example, consider the line from “Song of Myself”: “Not a youngster is taken for larceny but I go up too, and am tried and sentenced” (Whitman 71). Inherent in both of the passages of Thoreau and Whitman is the understanding that while it may not be possible for two people to occupy the same space at the same time, the poet, in the similar spirit of

Whitman's "urgent inclusiveness" (Whitman xxvii), generously gestures to his reader to enter a universality, a recognition of the human predicament—categorical isolation.

This paper begins by discussing the instability of categorizing lyric genre on mutually exclusive terms with regards to possessing worlds both inner and shared. Secondly, the paper presents three poems of Walt Whitman for analysis—"Song of Myself", "A Passage to India" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"—over a two-part discussion on the democratic and individual impulses in Whitman's lyric work. The paper concludes with a call for scholars to consider a new definition of the lyric that focuses on the degree to which a poem de-capitalizes the "I".

## **SECTION ONE**

### **The Precariousness in Defining Lyric Genre as Entirely Individual or Social**

In a discussion of the origins of Middle English lyric poetry, Seth Lerer shares that the notion of the lyric as an expression of personal identity and individuated voice is linked to the birth of subjectivity in the vernacular (Lerer 104). In presenting a poem written in the margins of a late-twelfth-century theological manuscript that has come to be understood as the "earliest example of the secular lyric" in Middle English, Lerer states that the "arresting first-person declaratives" and "effortless blend of personal desire" within the poem speaks directly to modern critical appreciations of the medieval lyric as well as the "expected personal identity we seek in lyric poetry" (Lerer 102). Lerer continues, offering that in reviewing the corpus of work regarding Old English texts that employ the first person, readers would find difficulty in locating individuated voices that were not the "verities of social statement and the ventriloquizing of the bardic" (Lerer 105). "Deor Widsith", an Old English poem that he cites, possesses—according to

Lerer—seemingly felt first-person utterances of German lament; yet, as the author argues, it is in actuality “a depersonalized form that seeks not the recovery of individuated voices” but is an example of a narrativized version of Christian doctrine or a speaking object (Lerer 105).

Lerer does two things that are misleading and ahistorical: First, by characterizing the expectation for cogent presentations of personal identity and individuated voice in the lyric as an expectation belonging to modern audiences, he causes one to miss the ways in which ancient critics and readers also sought expression of the individual or exile’s emotive prison song. Plato in speaking of the lyric poet argues that the poet is the only one who can “tell his story straight because his story is straight”—pure, direct, simple narration (Johnson 93). For Plato the poet is expert in his soul or inner world, he does not need to “hide behind his personae because he has nothing to hide.” For Plato, a poet is “always and only the good man telling his story about his goodness candidly without artifice” (ibid). Although the aforementioned is centered around Hellenistic culture and Lerer is focused on Middle English culture, discussing a search for an individuated voice in the lyric as a modern endeavor shades over the ways in which communities have engaged with poetry that transcend category, expectation and time.

Secondly, Lerer’s characterization of critics and readers’ appreciation of the modern lyric as being linked to a craving for an “effortless blend of personal desires” and “first-person declaratives,” misleads readers to believe that the modern era does not have a genre of lyric poetry that includes explicitly social elements. Heather Dubrow writes, “It is common to claim that the lyric speaker is isolated; yet...early modern pastorals, like many other lyrics of this period, not only celebrate community as a value but also are typically situated in a community of shepherds” (Dubrow 115). Dubrow is discussing Post-Conquest England under French occupation and lyric poetry that made explicit overtures to nationhood in lament of lost lands.

Another example of the lyric evoking a social situation is the work of Renaissance first-person poetry that frequently addressed not just a single audience but multiple audiences. Dubrow discusses pastoral poems of shepherds communicating with other shepherds or “the elegiac poet addressing the dead person or mourner” or poets who write for an audience who is not simply overhearing private thoughts but rather being indirectly addressed (Dubrow 127). For example, “the lament of the sonnet”, Dubrow continues, “may present itself as a private outpouring of sorrow but also functions as implicit pressure on the lady and an implicit complaint about her behavior to a male audience” (ibid).

Walt Whitman, one of the most lauded lyric poets, in *Song of Myself* writes in the poem’s first section:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.  
(Whitman 28)

And in the seventh section:

I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,  
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.)

Every kind for itself and its own, for me mine male and female  
(Whitman 35)

In the first section, Whitman de-capitalizes the “I.” One sees that Whitman uses the first-person as a vehicle of exchange, transference of “I” onto a “you”: “And what I assume you shall assume” (ibid). Similarly, in the seventh section a unique economy of “I” trading is referenced: the world of lovers; “I am the mate and companion of people” (ibid). Whitman is making an analogy that his concern for uniting with his countrymen is akin to the union of lovers. The



exchange of “I’s” between lovers has been historically manifested as a trading of first-person perspectives that can ultimately lead in the state of true love—or sexual expression—a dreamy state—to categorically isolated bodies becoming one body; in the case of Whitman and for Lerer, that dreamy state is the lyric itself.

Lerer in discussing the famous lyric from the marginalia of the Caligula manuscript, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, shares with reference to the nightingale that her announcement of tree song marks not only the occasions of desire but the moments of “desiring individuals, in a voice from which another, human, lyric ‘I’ may speak” (Lerer 109). Here, one sees again an almost transcendentalist trading of “I’s” in the lament of one in love: The nightingale becomes the speaker in the poem; the speaker in the poem and the object of his affection become one expression of love.

It is interesting that Lerer, who speaks of the lyric poem as individuated voice, would include in his analysis of Middle English poetry the framing of *The Owl and the Nightingale* in a way that focuses on the de-capitalization the “I”—“as desiring individuals, in a voice from which another, human, lyric ‘I’ may speak” (ibid). For, he in his above framing suggests, as the paper does, that the first person in the lyric need not be solely referential to one individual. Yet, Lerer in another breath describes “Deor Widsith” as containing seemingly first-person utterances that, he argues, is really “the ventriloquizing of the bardic” because the speaker in his use of “I” is actually, Lerer argues, a “narrativizing of Christian doctrine” rather than is truly expressing pure, unadulterated feelings. The speaker in poems like “Deor Widsith” uses “I” in a way that is not solely referential to the speaker that acts like a speaking object rather than subject (Lerer 105). Lerer’s confusion in how to characterize lyric elements is further example of why the paper

argues for flexible categories to define lyric poetry that take into account the genres multiplicity and how the poem de-capitalizes the “I.”

While Whitman employs the utilization of lyric form—the utilization of first person declaratives—he is very much concerned with the “verities of social statement”. Whitman, speaking about writing the nine editions of *Leaves of Grass*, shares that it is an experiment that very much speaks from a place that is intensely personal—a “radical utterance out of the abysses of the Soul” (Whitman xxvii). The poet allowed both the individual and social to stand side by side not only in his work but also in his mind.

The categorization of the lyric as a form that allows the unmediated expression of pure feelings is naïve as emotions are mediated by many competing urges both individual and social (Dubrow 115). Thus, I argue that a more useful discussion of lyric poetry should be centered on how the first-person is exchanged between the speaker and the reader rather than whether the speaker’s work represents pure, unadulterated personal lament.

Theodor Adorno believes that audiences generally experience the lyric as something wholly individual and opposed to society that has escaped the weight of material existence into a life free from coercive practices (Adorno 340). Yet, he writes that the demand that “the lyric word be virginal” is itself social in nature in that it “implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive” (Adorno 340). Adorno, also and more importantly, is speaking to a Hegelian social condition, a dialectic, in which society writ large is moving to transcend itself, and free itself from oppressive social conditions that limit freedoms whether one ever acknowledges it or not. Essentially, the “individual is mediated by the universal and vice versa” (Adorno 342 – 343).

Adorno echoes the danger, alluded above, in broadly casting out social elements of lyric poetry by arguing that “until we have either broadened it historically or turned it critically against the sphere of individualism, however, our conception of lyric poetry has a moment of discontinuity in it” (Adorno 341). One way to recover our conception of the lyric as including individuated voice is to accept that identity is messy and poetry often will challenge attempts to write it out of its perplexing existence.

Instead of suggesting that the modern lyric eschews the social, Lerer more accurately could have noted that the modern audience’s taste for the lyric’s first-person declaratives is connected with modernity’s social situation—that the rise in the interest in the individual author emerged on the advent of a new print culture, with the printing press.

Dubrow claims that manuscript culture virtually erases the autonomy of the individual writer in that, for example, a poem might be significantly changed a number of times in transmission (Dubrow 120). Texts are seen as amorphous and permeable in ways that minimize the poet’s identification with or control over his work (ibid).

For all of Lerer’s discussion of Carleton Brown’s discovery of a poem written in the margins of a theological text as upholding the iconic individuated voice in the lyric, neither Lerer nor Brown can identify the author. The ambiguity of his identity points to a more permeable and less private experience with poetry. For, although the monk pens a lyric in the margins, which on one hand might be interpreted as exemplifying the writing of a prison song in an isolated moment, the monk is consciously aware that audiences eventually seeking to read the primary text against which his marginalia poem is written would discover his scribbled song.

At the advent of print culture in modern times, there was a greater emphasis on the individual author; a radical change occurred in the conceptions of authorship and the parallel

development of bourgeois concepts of subjectivity (Dubrow 120). In discussing the irony between the seconds before sleep and death in Goethe's poem "Wanderers Nachtlied," Adorno suggests that the usage of irony in this case is "always bourgeois: the shadow-side of elevation of the liberated subject is its degradation to something exchangeable, to something that exists merely for something else" (Adorno 342).

Similar to Dubrow, the current section works to suggest that an examination of the lyric genre should be based in "an acknowledgement of the instability of that category" and an acknowledgement that some genres regularly encompass both lyric and narrative modes (Dubrow 126). Scholars should enter work from various critical perspectives and avoid characterizations of the genre that "neglect its multiplicity"—neglect its ability to be both social and individual (Dubrow 127).

Thus, the section to follow highlights the work of one the most lauded modern poets of the prison song, Walt Whitman, who was preoccupied with the notion of democracy and brotherhood in his lyric. Whitman's lyrics are in essence "untranslatable" (Whitman 89), messy and might have been excluded from viewership due to narrow categorization for how a poem, a lyric, must behave. Poetry, like the poet, is shifty.

Whitmanian lyric represents what could be lost in failing to acknowledge the messiness of genre distinctions and what strict adherence to expectations could cause us to overlook. Whitmanian lyric particularly represents an interesting interplay between the individual and collective and highlights how the two can stand side by side. Whitman expresses what the lyric often does, which is expressing a lament for worlds both inner and shared.

## **SECTION TWO**

## Decapitalizing the “I” and Democracy in Whitman’s Lyric

### Sub-Section A: Shifting Borders and the Unstable Self

In ancient Greece, the birthplace of democracy within Western culture, the lyric was essentially concerned with worlds that were both “inner and shared,” with small communities (Johnson 92). With astounding continuity, Whitman continues a writing that draws inspiration—albeit, by our understanding, unbeknownst to the poet—from the style of ancient Greek lyricism in his inclusion of social and national elements into personal poetry. As America was burgeoning into full democracy, Whitman garnered inspiration for *Leaves of Grass*, his magnum opus, from the birthing of a peculiar nation comprised of disparate peoples into one fragmented body. In his 1876 preface for *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes:

As I have lived in fresh lands, inchoate, and in a revolutionary age, future-founding, I have felt to identify the points of that age, these lands, in my recitatives... Within my time the United States have emerg’d from nebulous vagueness and suspense, to full orbic, (though varied) decision... Out that stretch of time... my Poems too have found genesis. (Whitman, xxvii-xxviii)

He speaks to the creative force—i.e. the creation of the Whitmanian lyric—that can find genesis from nebulous existence—an identity, a poetry, both whole and split, mirroring the peculiarity of the larger nation in which he dwelled.

In a letter to his friend William Douglass O’Connor on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1889 regarding the 1888 volume *Complete Poems and Prose*, Whitman continues his discussion on identity and nationhood:

“I can hardly tell why, but feel very positively that if anything can justify my revolutionary attempts and utterances, it is such *ensemble*—like a great city to modern civilization & a whole combined clustering paradoxical identity a man, a woman...” (Whitman, xxvii)

Whitman does not sublimate his dual identity for an individually sound one. In fact, the pull of the various forces within himself creates fertile ground for lamentation in his lyrics. In Section 16 of “Song of Myself”, Whitman writes:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,  
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,  
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,  
Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd with the stuff that is  
fine,  
One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the  
largest the same,  
A Southerner soon as a Northerner, a planter nonchalant and  
hospitable down by the Oconee I live (Whitman 44)

Here, Whitman de-capitalizes the “I” in the presentation of a fractured self whose borders were continually moving. In the dream world of the poem, he uses various identities to describe himself interchangeably: “Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man” (ibid). The pun Whitman presents in the lines “I am of old and young, of foolish as much as the wise / Regardless of others, ever regardful of others” highlights one who boldly decides to express a vibrant and shifting identity “regardless of others” as well as one grounded in concern for his fellow countrymen. America is a place whose borders and identity are continually on the verge of shifting, a place in which “a Southerner soon as a Northerner” dwells. In the above passage, Whitman exchanges an “I” with a budding democracy.

Whitman was an exuberantly conflicted man. In his famous proclamation in “Song of Myself” he writes, “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (Whitman 88). He was pulled by the transcendentalist concerns regarding the industrialization of America as well as by the innovative possibilities in communication in an industrial age. Whitman considered his lyric a response to the call by transcendentalists for an American poet who would lament the forests, which is as follows:

Where is the literature which gives expressions to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him... who derived his words as often as he used them—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots;—whose words were so true, and fresh, and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring...in sympathy with surrounding Nature. I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild...I demand something which no Augustan nor Elizabethan age—which no culture, in short, can give. Mythology comes nearer to it than anything. How much more fertile a nature at least has Grecian mythology its root than English Literature! (Thoreau 34).

Thoreau called for a lyric poet—“he would be a poet whose words were so true, and fresh, and natural” (ibid)—that was as untamed as the America transcendentalists sought. It is intriguing that Thoreau found the closest example of the poetry he desired in ancient Greek literary culture; for, the Whitmanian lyric and the Greek lyric both present the poem as the dream world, as the forest, where it is possible for the speaker and the reader to experience transfiguration—from individual to countrymen or from men to gods.

Whitman, many times over answered the above call to speak of lament in America employing the faculties of the natural world. In what is considered one of his best works, “When the Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Whitman mourns for the fallen president, Abraham Lincoln, demonstrating that he could in some sense accomplish what Thoreau lamented was absent in American poetry—one who could “impress the winds and streams into this service” (ibid). In the poem he speaks of mourning for Lincoln perennially, each time the flowers bloomed: “I mourn’d, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring. / Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring, / Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west, / And thought of him I love” (Whitman 328).

Whitman, who compared his ceaseless mourning to the bursting of lilacs in spring, was also entranced by the notion of an international brotherhood possible with new innovations in technology—which one could posit was toeing the line of opposition to the transcendentalist aim to forego modern inventions for the wisdom of the swamp.

Whitman’s pro-technology attitude was on display in “Passage to India,” which was first published a year after the laying of the British-India submarine telegraph cables. Two years earlier two additional important innovations in trade and communication emerged: (1) the Suez Canal opened a route between the Mediterranean and Red Seas—making trade from Europe to Asia easier, and (2) the first transcontinental railroad system was completed (Whitman, xxxv-xxxvi). Moved by “his great dream of international brotherhood” and the notion of “the venturing soul into the seas of God”, Whitman created his most distinguished poem of his later period (ibid). Here, one can trace the impetus for Whitman’s inclusion of lyric elements—“the venturing soul”—as well as more narrative, epic elements—“into the seas of God.” Thus, in a break from orthodox transcendentalism, Whitman is exuberant about industry and the possibilities it presents in the forging of a new channel and new economy of potential “I’s”—not only that of this countrymen but also the exchange of “I’s” between global citizens.

In “Passage to India” we return back to a poet halved: both inner and social. The distance from the reality of wholeness is the subject of the poet’s lament. The lyric voice in “Song of Myself” is a sprawling one seeking to contain itself, find a sense of place in its roaming—find a place in nature, a nation. In “Passage to India” the poet is lamenting a dream world ever threatened by the reality of the poet’s present condition—ultimate separation from his brother. Whitman’s speaker quixotically sets sail to India. Note that in the usage of “we” Whitman



regards his soul and himself, again complicating rigid notions of a lyric and foregoing what are thought to be classic lyric features such as the rigid use of first-person declaratives:

Greater than stars or suns,  
Bounding, O soul, thou journeyest forth;  
—What love, than thine and ours could wider amplify?  
What aspirations, wishes, outvie thine and ours, O soul?  
What dreams of the ideal? what plans of purity, perfection,  
strength?  
What cheerful willingness, for others' sake, to give up all?  
For others' sake to suffer all?  
(Whitman 419)

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Passage to more than India!  
O secret of the earth and sky!  
Of you, O waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers!  
Of you, O woods and fields! Of you, strong mountains of my land!  
Of you, O prairies! Of you, gray rocks!  
O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows!  
O day and night, passage to you!

O sun and moon, and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!  
Passage to you!

Passage—immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!  
Away, O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!  
Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!  
Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?  
Have we not grovell'd here long enough, eating and drinking like  
mere brutes?  
Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long  
enough?

Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only!  
Reckless, O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me;  
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,  
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.  
(Whitman 420)

Compared with the confident declaratives in “Song of Myself”, “Passage to India” presents a lyric voice unsure of itself—so much so it speaks of itself as a fractured entity: “Reckless, O soul, exploring. I with thee, and thou with me” (ibid). He presents the cries of a speaker utterly

exhausted by his own unrest and seeking rest and refuge in the distant other or the ocean—in the dream of full unification and communion. Whitman’s turmoil is endemic to the human condition and remedied in fantasy, in epic journey, in nature.

Whitman in the use of the first-person plural “we” in reference to his soul and his self as two separate entities once again is exchanging “I’s” within himself as if to ask his soul to allow his rational side a place of intervention. Ultimately, the Whitmanian lyric is as much about a restless soul as it is about an emerging democracy.

### **Sub-section B: Nationhood, Personhood and Invasion—A Prison Song**

While the refrain “passage to more than India” in Whitman’s 1871 poem by similar title, according to Blodgett and Bradley, is a movement to the poet’s dream for an international brotherhood—Whitman at his core was primarily concerned with the intersections between nationhood, personhood and encroachment onto freedoms specific to an American context (Whitman xxxv – xxxvi). Whitman was preoccupied with the “problems as well as the potentialities” of American democracy” (Whitman xxxv). The poems in Whitman’s 1859 cluster *Proto Leaf* emphasizes “the greatness of Love and Democracy” (Whitman xxxiii). Although begun before the Civil War, Whitman later made two edits to *Proto Leaf* post-war. In one of the poems in *Proto Leaf*— “America”— Whitman begins:

Centre of equal daughters, equal sons,  
All, all alike endear’d, grown, ungrown, young or old,  
Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich,  
Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love,  
A grand, sane, towering, seated Mother,  
Chair’d in the adamant of Time.  
(Whitman, 511)

Whitmanian lyric is an exaltation of America, positioning it as a second Eden, as a central host for a new nation, a new sense of “belongedness,” personhood, a new citizenry—one of “equal daughters, equal sons” (Whitman 511). Yet, Whitman writing during the Civil War understood Eden was being threatened—albeit from within itself.

The poet writes *Old War-Dreams* in 1865, at the end of the Civil War. Whitman describes a dream world or more precisely a nightmare where Eden, America, is compromised by the dead bodies within her lands and in dreaming gives life to the unnamed “faces of anguish”—exchanges his “I” for their dead bodies:

In midnight sleep of many a face of anguish,  
Of the look at first the mortally wounded, (of that indescribable  
look,)  
Of the dead on their backs with arms extended wide,  
I dream, I dream, I dream.

Of scenes of Nature, fields and mountains,  
Of skies so beautiful after a storm, and at night the moon so  
unearthly bright,  
Shining sweetly, shining down, where we did the trenches and  
gather the heaps,  
I dream, I dream, I dream.

Long have they pass'd, faces and trenches and fields,  
Where through the carnage I moved with callous composure, or  
away from the fallen,  
Onward I sped at the time—but now of their forms at night,  
I dream, I dream, I dream.  
(Whitman 484)

As a volunteer Union army nurse, journalist and sibling to an active soldier, Whitman all too well understood that in the birthing of a new country, the threat of invasion is ever-present.

*Proto-Leaf's*, whose poems' titles include ones such as “Wallabout Martyrs,” “To Those Who've Failed,” and “The Bravest Soldiers,” were inspired by the Civil War and exemplify more overtly an acknowledgement of one's land under siege. The sense of invasion, a nation at war or

occupied, mirrors the lyric lamentation to be freed from social or material constraint that encroaches upon the soul.

In Section 9 of “Crossing the Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman utilizes the image of ships docked at a Manhattan port to allude to the image of an invading navy. The threatening entity for Whitman’s speaker is the forces that attempt to prevent the speaker and the second person addressee from deepening their exchange:

Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower’d at sunset!

Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are,  
You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,  
About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung out  
divinest aromas,

...

Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves  
from us,  
We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently  
within us,  
We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also.  
(Whitman 164)

Whitman in the beginning lines “flaunt away, flags of all nations!” makes an exclamation to America, possibly, as the “melting pot,” where at her shores, all other allegiances must be lower’d at sunset (Whitman 164)—as an expression of lament for a deepening of exchange.

In this new melting pot—dreamland—the lyric “I” can be disintegrated; “The simple, compact, well-join’d scheme, myself disintegrated, everyone disintegrated yet part of the scheme” (Whitman 161). The “necessary film” between “I” vanishes. In the lyric, the poet has done the impossible—dissolved into its reader or countrymen and allowed his countrymen to find home in finally belonging to one another in body and soul. “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is a

lament at the inherent alienation in the human condition—ultimately categorical separation from one another.

Writing the early Middle English lyric, Lerer argues, is “a statement about belonging, “a claim for cultural uniqueness in an age when French rulers had measured the land (Lerer 106) as well as a form of resistance, a defense of the vernacular against the impositions of the foreign” (Lerer 107). Whitman continues his song of resistance in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry;” the speaker in the poem has the aim to remove the “film” of time and space to entire and into full communion with his countrymen—which is only possible when the poet lends the reader an “I” through which the reader could vicariously take on the speaker’s experience:

5  
What is it then between us?  
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?  
  
Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails  
not,  
I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,  
I too walk’d the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the  
waters around it,  
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,  
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,  
In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came  
upon me,  
I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,  
I too had receiv’d identity by my body,  
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I  
should be of my body. (Whitman 162)

Time and space are utilized in the poem as invading entities. Dubrow also describes the pastoral lyric during the Middle English period as being in part motivated from a sense of loss or invasion into the pastoral world through occupation (Dubrow 121). Specifically, she cites the emphasis on “the contrast between the *here* of the country and the *there* of the city or court” is due to the “spatial analogue,” which is then represented as the idyllic time before the pastoral world was

threatened (Dubrow 125). Whitman in the above passage also echoes a reference to temporal invasion: “What is the count of scores or hundreds of years between us / Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not” (Whitman 162). What threatens the addressee and the speaker from unification is the cruelty of distance and time, which separates all of humanity.

In “Song of Myself,” at the end of the poem, one sees that after his containment—embodied in “all presences outlaw’d or suffering”—Whitman is able to transcend the human condition and enter fully into the universal body of nature:

37

You laggards there on guard! look to your arms!  
In at the conquer’d doors they crowd! I am possess’d!  
Embody all presences outlaw’d or suffering,  
See myself in prison shaped like another man,  
And feel the dull unintermitted pain

For me the keepers of convicts shoulder their carbines and keep  
watch,  
It is I let out in the morning and barr’d at night.  
Not a mutineer walks handcuff’d to jail but I am handcuff’d to him  
and walk by his side,  
(I am less the jolly one there, and more the silent one with sweat  
on my twitching lips.)  
Not a youngster is taken for larceny but I go up too, and am tried  
and sentenced.  
Not a cholera patient lies at the last gasp but I also lie at the last  
gasp,  
My face is ash-color’d, my sinews gnarl, away from me people  
retreat.  
Askers embody themselves in me and I am embodied in them,  
I project my hat, sit shame-faced, and beg.

38

Enough! enough! enough!  
Somehow I have been stunn’d. Stand back!  
Give me a little time beyond my cuff’d head, slumbers, dreams,  
gaping  
(Whitman 71 - 72)

In an act of martyrdom, “See myself in prison shaped like another man” (ibid), the lyric speaker takes on the suffering and oppressive forces against his countrymen and is tried and sentenced on their behalf. Whitman’s martyrdom seems to be inspired from a deep empathy with those experiencing “unintermitted pain” (Whitman 71). For, although there were numerous instances where his work was poorly received, Whitman did occasionally garner wide reception—and, thus, it can be argued, experienced intermittent distress. He gives a clue in the above passage that he may have also characterized his distress as intermittent: “For me the keepers of convicts shoulder their carbines and keep watch / It is I let out in the morning and barr’d at night” (ibid). Whitman seems to have had the ability to straddle the morally acceptable world—editing newspapers and giving university lectures—while simultaneously being castigated, for example, with regards to his sexuality. Whitman’s speaker suggests that through his song of himself, he gifts the “outlaw’d” and “suffering” the use of the lyric “I” as a bridge through which escape from socially oppressive conditions is possible. The speaker still somehow retains a sense of himself as separate—acting in lieu of but not becoming those in which he possesses.

The greatest lyric works owe their quality to the force with which the “I” creates the illusion of nature or the poet emerging from alienation (Adorno 341). At the end of the Section 38, Whitman enters again into the world of illusion to escape his imprisonment and plans his final leap—at the concluding section, 52, of “Song of Myself”—into the universality of nature, only possible in his dreams.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,  
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,  
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow’d  
wilds,  
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

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,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you. (Whitman 89)

Adorno shares that the social interpretation of lyric poetry must discover how the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unity, is manifested in the work of art, in what way the work of art remains subject to society and in what way it transcends it (Adorno 340). Whitman in the conclusion of the poem proclaims his transcendence from the social world, “I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun” (Whitman 89).

Here the poet exercises superb skill in both form and content. The poem and the speaker refuse to even in the last be pinned down. The speaker sets up a metaphor stating one relationship and in the next line turns and complicates it. The speaker announces his location, “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,” and then suggests that even in his pronouncement, he will be undetectable, “Missing me one place search another, / I stop somewhere waiting for you” (ibid).

In describing his voice in the preface of the 1872 volume of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman presents his sprawling identity as “a composite, electric, democratic personality” in the most lyric of fashions—as a spurring forth from the “convictions, which make the unseen Soul govern absolutely at last” (Whitman xxix).



## **Conclusion: “I Contain Multitudes”**

The individual is mediated by the universal and the universal is mediated by the individual (Adorno 342-343). Thus, a genre of poetry most recognizably defined by its use of first person pronouns and declaratives must include a categorization that allows for the expression its own multiplicity. Dubrow argues that scholars and critics must enter the work from various critical perspectives (Dubrow 127). One proposal for a new critical perspective is to define the lyric by the degree to which it de-capitalizes the “I”—enters into an economy of trading “I’s” between the speaker and the audience.

Like the Romans who catalogued the Greek lyric into subdivisions that casted some lyric poetry out of viewership, narrow definitions may cause us to miss the nuanced ways in which a poem, a genre, a poet meets our expectations as well as misbehaves—such as the American lyric bard Walter Whitman.

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