



Practicing Infinity

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NOTES



PRACTICING INFINITY

IN A BRIEF ESSAY on “Whitman and the Idea of Infinity,” poet/critic James Longenbach triangulates Louise Glück, Emmanuel Levinas, and Walt Whitman in order to craft a definition of infinity in which the poet “must inhabit his desolation.”¹ Reading “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” as “the most rivetingly existential account of infinitude in the English language[,]” Longenbach describes how, in the poem’s final sentence, Whitman becomes “a thing himself[,]” a thing that, like the things around him, is “a metaphor for something else” (146, 147, 150). It’s a very modernist reading of Whitmanic infinity, the imagistic destruction of the self encoded in the very syntax of what Allen Ginsberg once called the Wordsworthian “nineteenth-century egoism” that Whitman “developed.”²

I’m perfectly comfortable with Longenbach’s historical retro-projection. After all, the notion of counting up to or down from selfhood—that is, the link between endless particulates and a belief in the continuity of the self—comes out of British Romanticism, which proffered several definitions of infinity (its aesthetics, its poetics) as crucial to Whitman as they were to modernism. I’ve written elsewhere about Locke’s parallel arguments that the “endless *addition* . . . of numbers . . . is that which gives us the clearest and most distinct idea of infinity” and that “the identity of the same *man* consists . . . in nothing but a participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized body.”³ Locke posits infinity and identity as twin abstractions understood via counting—by counting anything, in the former case, and accumulating moments that one is oneself, in the latter. This and other Enlightenment-era definitions of infinity—forged at a moment when the very concept was in crisis—represent not only an intellectual-historical context for British Romanticism but also a system of poetics with transatlantic and continuing influence. In particular, the historically specific understanding of the relationship

between enumeration and infinity gives us a new purchase on the line and its centrality to modernist poetics, while at the same time bringing out the extent to which many nineteenth-century poems—both British and American—may be said to anticipate that device.

With its accumulation of line upon line, the blank verse of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* approximates a Lockean enumerative framework in which repetition leads to a limited but real belief in selfhood and in what transcends it. This proves a useful context within which to examine its conclusion:

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
By reason and by truth; what we have loved
Others will love, and we may teach them how:
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things
(Which, 'mid all revolutions in the hopes
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of substance and of fabric more divine.⁴

If we take these closing lines at their (rather sentimental) word, then we have to figure out what it might mean for the poem to teach love, or to promise that love can be taught. Through the sometimes tedious acts of attention that make up the poem's detail-by-detail, memory-by-memory tracing of personal development, the reader is led to obsess, to consider, and to try to understand the life story of a mind. Perhaps these seemingly endless acts of attention are in themselves a kind of love, or a mechanism of love (something akin to "that best portion of a good man's life, / His little, nameless, unremembered acts, / Of kindness and of love").⁵ Transfiguring these unremembered acts into lines (after lines), the long poem leads its readers through a form of love.

By suggesting that we might turn from this form of love to Whitman's ecstatic poetics, I follow Joel Pace, who has argued that "Wordsworth's role in American literature and culture has been understated" and that contemporary critical readings of Wordsworth are "indebted to nineteenth-century America's Wordsworth."⁶ I note that

Wordsworth's poetic responses to infinity discourse encode their own repetitions, that Wordsworth was part of the literary-historical fabric for Whitman, and that the form of *Song of Myself* might be clarified in relation to *The Prelude* and in relation to Locke's definition of infinity.⁷

At one moment toward the beginning of *Song of Myself*, Whitman adapts his long-line aesthetic to a theory of reading:

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd
the earth much?
Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?⁸

Read in conjunction with Locke's understanding of infinity as a transcendent concept in which one can believe when one participates in the monotony of counting, in this brief excerpt, "get[ting] at the meaning of poems" follows reckoning grand spaces and practicing reading for "so long." The word "reckon" combines description, enumeration, navigation, calculation, and "reason[ing] with one's self" in order to "conclude from arguments."⁹ Similarly, learning to read via practice is an act of repetitive expansion that allows one to figure out what was previously incomprehensible.

And yet, when *Song of Myself* asks, "Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning[.]" its tone is at once self-reflexive and in urgent mockery. The tonal duality hinges on an older definition of the term "reckon," denoting a chain or fetter (OED). Read in this way, the poem compares "getting at the meaning" to fencing in a thousand acres or trying to restrain the earth entire; it also compares "thinking about" to "fencing in." This chastisement asks the reader to open the mind to the poem as process, whether because meaning can no more be "gotten at" than the earth can be fettered, or because the very act of reading—the repetition of it, the daily quality of it—is the surest path to a poem's message. If the mechanism of a poem, the flow of line upon line, elucidates the poem, then understanding a poem is nothing to be proud of. Every act of reading is an act of interpretation, of demystification. Similarly, the 1844 Webster's Dictionary offers "To count; to number; that is, to tell the particulars" as a primary definition of "reck'on" while also noting the etymological connection

to “rule or govern.” So, as in Locke’s understanding of infinity, reckoning carries with it a sense of transcendent impossibility—one can no more count to infinity than rule the earth.

Consider the following moment from *Song of Myself*, in which Whitman addresses questions of number:

It is time to explain myself—let us stand up.

What is known I strip away,
I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown.

The clock indicates the moment—but what does eternity indicate?

We have thus far exhausted trillions of winters and summers,
There are trillions ahead, and trillions ahead of them.

Births have brought us richness and variety,
And other births will bring us richness and variety.

I do not call one greater and one smaller,
That which fills its period and place is equal to any. (71)

Repetition leads to expansion here—not only theoretically but also in the poem’s explicit content. At the beginning of the section, an em-dash creates a tangible apposition between “myself” and “us,” the singular and the collective. In addition to the basic syntactic meaning, i.e., that the explanation begins with a call to stand, we see here that when the wish to explain “myself” is announced, the text typographically indicates that the collectivity can stand up; “let us” is interesting not only as an idiomatic representation of how one directs a group to which one belongs but also as a speech act in which permission is granted, in which “us” is “let,” permitted to pass, or set free.

After the poem claims to “strip away” the known and “launch” every single being “into the Unknown,” a resonant image of counting to infinity chimes in counterpoint: “The clock indicates the moment—but what does eternity indicate?” In this way, the poem’s clear statement of its project—its claim to explain itself—can be seen not only as the pan-social standing up, stripping away of the known, and launching into the unknown that the poem narrates, but also as the

question of what the sum of all time—the sum of all clocks ticking every moment—indicates. In the spirit of its theory of reading, *Leaves of Grass* explains itself via the question of what eternity indexes, or the idea of what ultimate repetition opens up.

By this token, we may notice anew that the section begins: “It is time to explain myself[.]” Flipping the syntax, we see that the algebra of this sentence also implies: “To explain myself is time.” In this way, the poem—and the expansive personality constructed within the text of the poem—equates itself with time, with the problem of the clock’s immediacy versus its tenuous relationship to eternity. *Song of Myself* here recapitulates its theory of reading and its overall project insofar as the poem, and “myself,” is at once the clock ticking the moment and, by extension, part of eternity. Thus, after a meditation on number, richness, and variety, *Song of Myself* concludes this meditation on “trillions . . . and trillions” by stating: “I do not call one greater and one smaller, / That which fills its period and place is equal to any.” Equality, an integral part of the poem’s greater project, is here defined in terms of discrete number. One is not greater or smaller as long as one fills up period and place, or time and space—it is the sheer number of things, then, that makes them equal. And so, as with counting to infinity, or, in a Lockean frame, counting to believe in infinity or identity, in *Song of Myself* the spontaneous, spiritual, transcendent monism follows from discrete “trillions” and “trillions,” from number leading to numberlessness, from the immense value of filling up a bit of space or a moment of time or the span of a sentence. With this in mind, perhaps we might ask whether Whitman’s long line often gets too much credit. Sure, it reaches out and out to take in everything, but perhaps sometimes, as in *Song of Myself*, it is the spillage of line upon line, the seeming trillions, the encoded *practice* of reading, that lets us believe in the long line at all.

NOTES

- 1 James Longenbach, "Whitman and the Idea of Infinity," in *Walt Whitman, Where the Future Becomes Present*, ed. David Haven Blake and Michael Robertson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 147.
- 2 Allen Ginsberg, "Allen Ginsberg Class on Walt Whitman and William Wordsworth," *Naropa Audio Archive*, archive.org/details/naropa_allen_ginsberg_class_on_walt.
- 3 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 198, 299.
- 4 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979), 482.
- 5 *Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, ll. 34-36, in Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 111-117.
- 6 Joel Pace, "Wordsworth and America: Reception and Reform," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 243.
- 7 For an influence argument connecting Wordsworth and Whitman, see Richard Gravil's *Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities, 1776-1862* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) as well as Kenneth Price's analysis of his argument in *Romantic Circles Reviews & Receptions* ([Review of *Richard Gravil, Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities, 1776-1862*] [September 2002], www.rc.umd.edu/reviews-blog).
- 8 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, deathbed edition (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891-1892), 30. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org).
- 9 All but the last of these denotations are from "reckon, v." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (June 2009). Online. The quoted denotation is from "Definition for RECK'ON" from the 1844 Webster's Dictionary, available on the Emily Dickinson Lexicon (Brigham Young University), edl.byu.edu/webster.