

AMERICAN CULTURES OF DEATH AND DYING: WALT WHITMAN'S LATE STYLE
AND THE *ARS MORIENDI*

by

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(Under the Direction of Cody Marrs)

ABSTRACT:

Focused on Walt Whitman's annexes *Sands at Seventy* (1888) and *Good- Bye My Fancy* (1891)—the verse clusters which complete the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* and epitomize Walt Whitman's late style—my dissertation presents the latest version of his *magnum opus* as an American *Ars moriendi*. The inaugural chapter of my dissertation surveys American cultures of death and dying in the first half of the nineteenth century and closely reads Walt Whitman's antebellum collection *Live Oak, with Moss*. The opening chapter of my dissertation thus tracks the development of Walt Whitman's lifelong obsession with death in the decades leading up to the Civil War. In the second chapter, I demonstrate how the war impacted Whitman's poetry—*Drum-Taps* in particular— and generated the poet's late style. The third chapter of my dissertation accepts Walt Whitman's August 1891 *Lippincott's Magazine* assignment and ciphers, or very closely reads, the clusters *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*. This chapter is devoted to the careful explication of Walt Whitman's late style which reaches fruition in the annexes to the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Finally, my fourth chapter enlists the help of contemporary physicians to diagnose in detail the cultural problem facing Americans of the twenty-first century—and that is our inability to healthfully cope with our mortality and mourning, a problem borne out of our insistence on isolating the affairs of

death and dying away from our daily lives. In this closing chapter, I describe the problem, and then I prescribe Walt Whitman's Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, with its essential clusters *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*, as pedagogical correctives for our culture. I argue that Walt Whitman's late style can help modern Americans redefine what it means to die a Good Death and meet said death with dignity.

INDEX WORDS: American literature, Nineteenth-century American literature and culture, Walt Whitman, Deathcare, Funeral culture, *Ars moriendi*, Civil War, Medical humanities, poetics, Modernism, Imagism, Deathbed edition *Leaves of Grass*, *Sands at Seventy*, *Good-Bye My Fancy*

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DEDICATION

Every good or worthy thing I do is for—and because of— Dr. Hannah P. McQueen. This manuscript is no exception. I also wish to dedicate my dissertation to Funeral Director Nathaniel J. McQueen and Professor John Wharton Lowe III: y'all never left me.

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*May I say that life is filled with instructions
we just don't believe we are ever going to need?*
Barbara Kingsolver, *How to Fly (In Ten Thousand Easy Lessons)*¹

¹ Barbara Kingsolver, *How to Fly (In Ten Thousand Easy Lessons)* (Harper, 2020), 49.

INTRODUCTION: HAIL, MY FANCY¹

*You lingering sparse leaves of me on winter-nearing boughs,
 And I some well-shorn tree of field or orchard-row;
 You tokens diminute and lorn— (not now the flush of May, or July clover-bloom— no grain of
 August now;)
 You pallid banner-staves— you pennants valueless— you overstay'd of time,
 Yet my soul-dearest leaves confirming all the rest,
 The faithfulest —hardest — last.
 Walt Whitman, “You Lingering Sparse Leaves of Me”²*

For his last will and testament, the English poet John Keats penned a single line of iambic pentameter: “My chest of books divide among my friends.”³ Though he died very young and had comparatively little time to prepare for his death, Keats keenly perceived the inextricability of human art and aging processes. In other words, John Keats recognized that the pinnacle of artistic achievement is an instructive engagement with mortality. The poet thought that William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* was an especially triumphant meditation on mortality, and he acknowledged how difficult the readerly terrain. Keats prepares for the journey in “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Again.” The sonnet reads:

O golden-tongued Romance with serene lute!

Fair plumed Syren! Queen of far away

¹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 655.

² Walt Whitman, 1891-1892 *Leaves of Grass* (1891-1892, reprinted in *The Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, edited by Justin Kaplan, 147-672, The Library of America, 1982, represented as “Deathbed LoG” in subsequent footnotes), 633.

³ Morgan Library and Museum, “My chest of books divide among my friends” (accessed March 9, 2025, <https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/keats/my-chest-books-divide-among-my-friends#:~:text=Before%20leaving%20for%20Italy%20in,Books%20divide%20among%20my%20friends.&text=may%20be%20servicable%20%5Bsic%5D%20in%20your%20possession.&text=few%20pounds%20I%20owe%20him.>).

Leave melodizing on this wintry day,
 Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute:
 Adieu! for once again the fierce dispute,
 Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay
 Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
 The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit.
 Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,
 Begetters of our deep eternal theme,
 When through the old oak forest I am gone,
 Let me not wander in a barren dream,
 But when I am consumed in the fire,
 Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.⁴

The most famous American poet and so-called “father of free verse” also loved *King Lear* best.

A fan of both Shakespeare and Keats, Walt Whitman similarly offered an arduous, sublime meditation on mortality when he published the 1891-1892 Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

In the following dissertation, I identify Whitman’s *magnum opus* as an American *Ars moriendi*—an essential cultural corrective for the poet’s twenty-first-century countrymen who face an unprecedented crisis surrounding the processes of death and dying. Ultimately, I plant Walt Whitman’s Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* at the heart of a new, death-positive medical humanities curriculum relevant to both patients and providers—to all of us.

⁴ John Keats, “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again” (Poetry Foundation. Accessed March 9, 2025, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44482/on-sitting-down-to-read-king-lear-once-again>).

Human mortality means that each of us will reprise at least one of these roles during our lifetime. Awareness of this mortality is the unique inheritance of our species, and yet, mortality is the sorest subject in the contemporary United States. In *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Philippe Ariès confirms that by the start of the twentieth century—the so-called “American Century”—death had replaced sex as the primary social taboo. Here is our cultural crisis. What is inevitable has become unspeakable.⁵ Modern Americans cloister the sick, dying, and deceased in hospitals, nursing homes, and funeral parlors. We avert our gaze from mortality and operate as though we are immortal. When death finally comes, we are unprepared. In the twenty-first century, Americans are dying alone on ventilators and in intensive care units without any sense of sovereignty. The experience has become spiritually sterile. Drew Gilpin Faust’s research, and particularly her monograph *This Republic of Suffering*, reveals how the Civil War turned the tide and soured nineteenth-century Americans’ healthful relationship with mortality epitomized in their quest for a “Good Death.” Throughout this dissertation, I will focus on the Civil War as such a catalyst because it was so personally relevant to Walt Whitman. But many other global phenomena reinforced the cultural changes wrought by the war and helped create our contemporary crisis. Scientific advancements of the nineteenth century, most notably Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, began to erode collective faith in immortality and the Christian worldview. World War I and World War II delivered mass deaths at a distance and further estranged the average American from the notion of his or her own mortality and responsibility to the dead. And deathcare—or the enlightened preparation for death that is both physical and mental, individual and collaborative—was commercialized in the American funeral industry.

⁵ Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 85-87.

Funeral director Caitlin Doughty sums up the state of the industry:

In America, where I live, death has been big business since the turn of the twentieth century. A century has proven the perfect amount of time for its citizens to forget what funerals once were: family- and community-run affairs. In the nineteenth century no one would have questioned [my client's] daughter preparing her mother's body—it would have seemed strange if she *didn't*. No one would have questioned a wife washing and dressing the body of her husband or a father carrying his son to the grave in a homemade coffin. In an impressively short time, America's funeral industry has become more expensive, more corporate, and more bureaucratic than any other funeral industry on Earth. If we can be called best at anything, it would be at keeping our grieving families separated from their dead.”⁶

Rapid advancements in modern medicine have coincided with the commercialization of the American funeral industry and enabled collective death avoidance. In the contemporary United States, a physician has an almost limitless array of tools with which they might arrest disease or intervene in a patient's decline. These positive gains are offset by the fact that modern physicians are trained to view death as their natural enemy—resulting in care that prioritizes quantity over quality. By the late 1960s, American culture was so steeped in this ethos that it began to appear in our literature. In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim takes it for granted that “...the [hospital] staff, of course, was devoted to the idea that weak people should be helped as much as possible, that nobody should die.”⁷ And in *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin reveals: “Behind what we think of as the Russian menace lies what we do not wish to face, and what

⁶ Caitlin Doughty, *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 3.

⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (Delacorte Press, 1969), 171.

white Americans do not face when they regard a Negro: reality—the fact that life is tragic. Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have.”⁸ To reaffirm Baldwin while borrowing Ernest Becker’s title— Americans are exceptional at *The Denial of Death*.

It is in our literature that we might find our salvation. The Deathbed edition of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*—featuring the appendices *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy* which epitomize the poet’s late style— forms an *Ars moriendi*. I begin my study thereof by meeting Walt Whitman in the middle of the long nineteenth century. Close reading his private cluster of verse largely inspired by Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence—Whitman’s *Live Oak, with Moss*— I first offer an understanding of how nineteenth-century American funeral culture positively directed Walt Whitman’s inborn fascination with death. In other words, in my first chapter, I follow as Walt Whitman develops his concept of a “Good Death.” Next, I turn to examine the roots of Walt Whitman’s late style—that which defines his most essential poetry about death and dying found in the annexes *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*. The second chapter of this dissertation exhaustively traces the war’s impact on Whitman’s poetry, specifically that of *Drum-Taps*, and identifies the American Civil War as the origin of Walt Whitman’s distinct late style.

Edward Said’s final piece of scholarship is a metacommentary *On Late Style*. Said concludes in his monograph on aging art that an author’s late style will typically follow one of two

⁸ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1962, reprinted by Vintage Books, 1993), 91.

trajectories. The late style can conform to the career which preceded it and prove a contented embrace or coronation. Alternatively, a late period can prove an almost total disruption. Far more interesting to Said is this "...artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution, but as intransigence, difficulty, an unresolved contradiction... an occasion to stir up more anxiety... a nonharmonious, nonserene tension."⁹ Walt Whitman's late style refuses to orbit around either one of Edward Said's proposed poles. At times, Whitman's late style seems to belong to that first, serene category. The second poem of *Good-Bye My Fancy* is called "Lingering Last Drops." Therein, Walt Whitman asks his late, persistent poems directly: "And whence and why come you?" He is surprised and a little frustrated at their arrival, but quickly recognizes their affinity to his *Calamus* cluster of verse in which he first describes his poems as spontaneous "Trickle drops... bleeding drops... confession drops."¹⁰ Whitman's late lingering drops confirm their lineage and reply "...we drift here with the rest, / ...we linger'd and lagg'd – but were wafted at last, and are now here, / To make the passing shower's concluding drops."¹¹ The second appendix's "An Ended Day" likewise teases us with serenity, summary, "the soothing sanity and blitheness of completion—" but the hope expires when we spy an intruder hanging onto the piece's coattails. "An Ended Day" is an annotated poem, and the footnote is nearly four times as long as the poem itself.¹² This phenomenon has no parallel in Whitman's early work.

If "An Ended Day" renders Said's serene model a suspect fit for Whitman's late style, other pieces of *Good-Bye My Fancy* nudge us toward an embrace of the scholar's disruptive model. Whitman's "The Rounded Catalogue Divine Complete" certainly seems a "deliberately

⁹ Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (Pantheon Books, 2006), 7.

¹⁰ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 278.

¹¹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 639.

¹² Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 641.

unproductive productiveness [a] going *against*.”¹³ In this brief poem, Whitman concentrates: “The devilish and the dark, the dying and diseases’d, / The countless (nineteen-twentieths) low and evil, crude and savage... / Newts, crawling things in slime and mud, poisons.”¹⁴ And so, Whitman seems to depart from the world of *Song of Myself* in which dreadful things are but passing clouds on an expansive horizon and even that most dreadful of phenomena, death, is nothing to fear. Anton Vander Zee confirms that such “melancholic debris, difficult and resistant... persists across the late work” and refuses to allow us the consolation that Whitman’s late style is a wholly cooperative crowning of the work that came before it.¹⁵ Ultimately, it makes sense that no model of late style, however keen and pedagogically useful, could fit Walt Whitman who famously boasted: “Do I contradict myself? Very well then... I contradict myself; / I am large... I contain multitudes.”¹⁶ Whitman’s late style requires an organic and comprehensive approach. The third chapter of my dissertation operates in this mode and offers close readings of the poems which comprise *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*. In addition to providing a definition of Walt Whitman’s late style, the third chapter of my dissertation articulates my unique contribution to the field of literary studies and the practice of periodization. I pause to foreground this aspect of my research in recognition of the fact that the body of my dissertation aims at world-meaning and faces a public broader and more inclusive than my profession. Finally, the fourth chapter of my dissertation describes the current mortality crisis in the United States in greater detail and demonstrates how Walt Whitman’s Deathbed

¹³ Said, *Late Style*, 7.

¹⁴ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 651.

¹⁵ Anton Vander Zee, “Inventing Late Whitman” (*ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, 63, no. 4 (2017): 641-680, doi: 10.1353/esq.2017.0022), 61.

¹⁶ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 87.

edition of *Leaves of Grass*—made complete by the annexes *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*—functions as a restorative *Ars moriendi*.

Christopher Hager and Cody Marrs asserted: “Although the post-Civil War period has long been viewed as ‘the twilight of the poets,’ as Edmund Clarence Stedman famously declared in 1885, it is full of poetry that is just as rich and engaging as anything published before the war.”¹⁷ In agreement, I add that Walt Whitman’s twilight poetry—that penned in the waning light of his life—is just as rich as his midcentury masterpieces like *Song of Myself*. Near his end and in conversation with his devotee Horace Traubel, Walt Whitman ruminated:

...[William] James and some others appear to think I rest my philosophy, my democracy, upon braggadocio, noise, rough assertion, such integers. While I would not be afraid to assent to this as a part of the truth I still insist that I am on the whole to be thought of in other terms. I recognize, have always recognized, the importance of the lusty, strong-limbed, big-bodied American of the *Leaves*: I do not abate one atom of that belief now, today. But I hold to something more than that, too, and claim a full, not a partial judgement upon my work—I am not to be known as a piece of something but as a totality.”¹⁸

My dissertation aims to know Walt Whitman and his Deathbed achievement in their totality. In *So Long! Walt Whitman’s Poetry of Death*, Harold Aspiz aptly dubs the bard “a sensitive student of death and dying.”¹⁹ Uniquely focused on Walt Whitman’s late style epitomized by the annexes *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*, I reveal the ways in which Walt Whitman is also a teacher of the art of dying well.

¹⁷ Christopher Hager and Cody Marrs, “Against 1865: Reperiodizing the Nineteenth Century” (*J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1, no. 2 (2013): 259-284, doi:10.1353/jnc.2013.0026), 271.

¹⁸ Qtd. by ed. Brenda Wineapple, *Walt Whitman Speaks: His Final Thoughts on Life, Writing, Spirituality, and the Promise of America as told to Horace Traubel* (Library of America, 2019), 58.

¹⁹ Harold Aspiz, *So Long! Walt Whitman’s Poetry of Death* (The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 1.

CHAPTER ONE: WALT WHITMAN AND THE ANTEBELLUM *ARS MORIENDI*

*Death is a Dialogue between
The Spirit and the Dust.
“Dissolve,” says Death,
The Spirit “Sir
I have another Trust” –
Death doubts it –
Argues from the Ground –
The Spirit turns away
Just laying off for evidence
An Overcoat of Clay.
Emily Dickinson, 973¹*

INTRODUCTION TO DEATH AND DYING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

There is a nearly unfathomable gulf between nineteenth- and twenty-first century Americans’ understandings of and attitudes toward death and dying. Whitman and his *Ars moriendi* can help us bridge this divide and solve the contemporary cultural crisis surrounding mortality and deathcare, but first, we must meet him in the midst of his bustling, long nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century Americans believed it was possible to die a “Good Death.” Subscribing to the centuries-long and historically Christian tradition of the *Ars moriendi*, Whitman’s countrymen were trained in the art of dying well. American Historian Drew Gilpin Faust gives us a sense of what this preparatory work entailed:

The concept of the Good Death was central to mid-nineteenth-century America, as it had long been at the core of Christian practice. Dying was an art, and the tradition of *ars moriendi* had provided rules of conduct for the moribund and their attendants since at least the fifteenth century: how to give up one’s soul ‘gladlye and willfully’;

¹ *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

how to meet the devil's temptations of unbelief, despair, impatience, and worldly attachment; how to pattern one's dying on that of Christ; how to pray.²

In her seminal history of death and the American Civil War *This Republic of Suffering*, Faust goes on to explain that by midcentury—by the time of Walt Whitman's stubbornly mysterious poetic awakening and subsequent debut of *Leaves of Grass*—the notion of a Good Death had been largely divorced from its ancient religious context. Striving toward a noble end was not the exclusive pursuit of nineteenth-century American Christians. Rather, securing a Good Death was a massive preoccupation of middle-class America.

Whitman and his countrymen could not deny and evade death in the mode of our twenty-first century; death was a pervasive presence in the new nation. Surveying *Walt Whitman's America* and the poet's lifelong fascination with mortality, David S. Reynolds explains: "A reason for Whitman's obsession with death was the loss of life he saw around him in urban America. In a time when epidemics went virtually unchecked and the urban death rate rose dramatically, Whitman felt that the health of all Americans was in peril. In Manhattan, the annual death rate climbed from one in every forty New Yorkers in 1840 to one in twenty-seven by 1855. Even the completion of the Croton Aqueduct in 1842 did not improve sanitation sufficiently to stem the rising tide of yellow fever, measles, tuberculosis, and, beginning in the late forties, cholera. In 1847 Whitman noted in the *Eagle* that only half of the 450,000 children born annually in America lived to be twenty-one..."³ Infant mortality was high, and pathogens felled many Americans, but Whitman's countrymen were also killing themselves and one another. The poet witnessed rising homicide and suicide rates in Manhattan and other urban centers. Still, of all the

² Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008, Vintage Civil War Library Edition, Vintage Books, 2009), 6-7.

³ David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 238.

antebellum American deaths, fictional Eva of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* achieved the most famous—and perhaps the most Good.

Nineteenth-century American scholarship includes myriad analyses of her death, as it is representative of what exactly Americans were searching for; Eva's is a textbook Good Death. Experiencing what physicians now call a “terminal rally” shortly before her untimely end, young Eva confirms her salvation and contented expectation of a better world beyond this one. Eva dies surrounded by her vigilant family and faithful friends. Importantly, these friends, including the titular Tom, witness the “high and almost sublime expression” on her face at the end, and they record her last words: “love, —joy, — peace!”⁴ Each of these phenomena were key components of the Good Death. Nineteenth-century Americans especially prized last words—a reverence which helps explain the special trauma wrecked by the American Civil War and its many deaths experienced so far from home.

Nineteenth-century Americans expected death to be a family affair and a hands-on experience. Loved ones wiped the feverish brow, strained to hear those precious last words, dressed, posed, and photographed their dead. Americans died in their homes. Hospitals were stigmatized—considered the disreputable place for vagrants and paupers. Not only did Americans die in their homes, but they were also displayed there postmortem for funeral services and wakes. It was only after the turn of the century that commercial funeral parlors became the standard sites for viewings and memorials. This is when the American parlor became the ‘living room—’ when the dead were literally removed.⁵ For extended wakes, nineteenth-century

⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852, reprinted with Original 1852 Illustrations by Suzeteo Enterprises, 2019), 275-276.

⁵ National Museum of Funeral History, “19th Century Mourning,” Accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.nmfh.org/portfolio-item/19th-centurymourning/#:~:text=rief%20was%20more%20than%20just,mourning%20rather%20than%20private%20grieving.>

Americans used vinegar-soaked cloths and blocks of ice to prevent serious decomposition. Wooden coffins were crafted locally and more materially honest than contemporary, rechristened “caskets.” These were clearly boxes shaped for human remains, and burial was also a local, family-run operation.⁶ Memorial strategies were endlessly creative. Mourners did not shy away from the material realities of being mortal. For example, many nineteenth-century Americans embroidered keepsakes and made wreaths using the hair of their deceased. With similar tokens, Americans also sewed memory quilts and compiled gift books. Grievers collaborated on these manuscripts and very often composed and circulated elegiac verse in the process.⁷ And they wrote impactful sentimental novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.⁸ Where we have euphemism, nineteenth-century Americans had engagement.

In the following chapter, I survey Walt Whitman’s experiments in literary sentimentality which ultimately resulted in the cluster *Live Oak, with Moss*, a collection the poet declined to publish in his lifetime. Diving in, I offer a close reading of the twelve poems which comprise *Live Oak, with Moss* in its original form. I conclude that this sequence proves a highly personal, pocketbook version of the *Ars moriendi* in which Walt Whitman works out his lingering death anxiety and prepares for the long trek toward the Deathbed edition of his *Leaves of Grass*—his public, complete *Ars moriendi*. Whitman’s pronounced antebellum death anxiety, or his concern that mortality annihilates human meaning and therefore his vocation in poetry, helps explain the poet’s decision to shelve *Live Oak, with Moss*. In addition to consulting fellow literary critics

⁶ For more insight into this phenomenon dubbed a “rebranding” by funeral director Caitlin Doughty, see her book *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes & Other Lessons from the Crematory*.

⁷ This memorial/deathcare context is important for understanding other nineteenth-century coterie poets like Emily Dickinson.

⁸ Other major examples of the nineteenth-century American sentimental novel include *Hope Leslie, or, Early Times in the Massachusetts* (1827) by Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) by Susan Warner, *The Gates Ajar* (1868) by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) by Francis Ellen Watkins Harper.

along the way, I also engage with the work of leading psychoanalysts and anthropologists in order to reflect Whitman's dual commitments to the humanities and to medicine.

WALT WHITMAN AND LITERARY SENTIMENTALITY:

Walt Whitman was inspired by such collaborative affairs among his countrymen, and death was bound up with *Leaves of Grass* from the beginning. Famously dissimilar to his son, Walter Whitman Sr. did share the poet's histrionic flare. Born the same day the Bastille was stormed, Walter Whitman Sr. died on July 11, 1855, as *Leaves of Grass* debuted.⁹ Shortly thereafter, Walt Whitman's father was buried in the Cemetery of the Evergreens in Williamsburg.¹⁰ His funeral was presided over by a Baptist preacher in accordance with the widowed mother Louisa Van Velsor Whitman's wishes rather than his own. Whitman senior had been a freethinker all his life and in that vein most significantly influenced his son Walt Whitman. After the funeral, Whitman Jr. followed his sister Mary Van Nostrand (née Whitman) to her home in Greenport and happily summered there in the coastal town. Vacationing, Walt Whitman seemed largely unscathed by the death of his father. Biographers have explained this apparent nonchalance as a natural response to the loss of a parent with whom the poet shared a contentious relationship. Too, many Whitman scholars have suggested that the progenitor's long period of illness allowed Walt to grieve him in advance.

Surely, there is truth in both of these explanations. But death, including his father's, preoccupied Whitman's poetic imagination as he issued and initiated his lifelong tinkering with *Leaves of Grass*. I am not the first critic to suspect, for example, the paternity of the body mentioned in the very first paragraph of the 1855 preface to *Leaves*: "America... perceives that

⁹ Walt Whitman's father died following a long period of infirmity. The poet would similarly experience a lengthy decline after his first of many strokes in 1873.

¹⁰ In the fourth and final chapter of this dissertation, I will briefly touch on Walt Whitman's interactions with the park-lawn and rural cemetery movements of the 1820s, 30s, and 40s.

the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house... perceives that it waits a little while in the door.... that it was fittest for its days... that its action has descended to the stalwart and well-shaped heir who approaches... and that he shall be fittest for his days.”¹¹ Of course, this paragraph also calls Ralph Waldo Emerson to mind—and Emerson’s death was almost thirty years away. In other words, Whitman Sr.’s death only focused his son’s existent meditation that sometimes waxed more broad and considered the immortality possible through positive influence—like that which Emerson had over him and his young book. Like so many of his countrymen, Whitman was fascinated with death and, to borrow a phrase from William Wordsworth, with intimations of immortality.

In the 1840s, Walt Whitman wrote a handful of sensational short stories involving death of the grisly variety. Most notably, Whitman debuted “Death in the School-Room. A Fact.” in the *Democratic Review* in 1841. Like Whitman’s temperance novel *Franklin Evans*, the story was very often reprinted—a success for the young author. David Reynolds has suggested that the popularity of “Death in the School-Room. A Fact.” can be explained by its sensationalism in context.¹² Reynolds dubs the story a prime example of what he calls “immoral reform” literature, or reform-minded texts in which “the description of vice [is] so vivid that the vice itself predominates over the ostensible moral.”¹³ But the sensationalism surrounding death did not stay confined to Whitman’s short fiction—trickles of the phenomenon leaked into 1855’s *Leaves of Grass*. In the poem later called *Song of Myself*, Whitman pans away from two youthful scenes (“The little one sleeps in its cradle... / The youngster and the redfaced girl turn aside up the

¹¹ Walt Whitman, 1855 *Leaves of Grass* (1855, reprinted in *The Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, edited by Justin Kaplan, 2-145, The Library of America, 1982, represented as “1855 LoG” in subsequent footnotes), 5.

¹² Interestingly, the public’s seemingly insatiable appetite for violent, shocking stories (what we now call “true crime”) is another cultural tie between the American nineteenth- and twenty-first centuries. This link ought to be more fully explored and could help explain the death and dying crisis further.

¹³ Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 75.

bushy hill...”) toward a violent tableau. The speaker remembers: “The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom. / It is so... I witnessed the corpse... there the pistol had fallen.”¹⁴

This poetic pivot is brutal—a move meant to stun and stir.

Subsequently, *Song of Myself*’s speaker witnesses: “The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirmed case... / The malformed limbs are tied to the anatomist’s table, / What is removed drops horribly in a pail; / The quadron girl is sold at the stand... the drunkard nods by the barroom stove... / The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck.”¹⁵ Still later in the sprawling poem, Whitman’s cosmic ego recounts, in juicy detail, the 1853/4 wreck of the steamship “San Francisco,” the 1836 massacre of over four hundred American soldiers at Goliad, and a maritime clash between American and British frigates.¹⁶ Walt Whitman’s early forays into literary sensationalism are often violent and almost always corporeal. Perhaps the most iconic scandal of *Song of Myself* is the poet’s boast: “Copulation is no more rank to me than death is... / Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from; / The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer, / This head is more than churches or bibles or creeds.”¹⁷ Such body brags and dismissals of death’s fearfulness abound in *Song of Myself*. In an opening salvo, the speaker exults:

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 ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward...

And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

¹⁴ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 33.

¹⁵ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 39-41.

¹⁶ In these moments, it is easiest to catch a glimpse of Whitman the former newspaper man.

¹⁷ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 51.

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born? I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.¹⁸

Later on, even in diminuendo, the speaker crows: “No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death... / And as to you death, you bitter hug of mortality... it is idle to try to alarm me... / And as to you corpse I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me.”¹⁹ These lines, so often quoted and so dear to Whitman’s countless fans, demonstrate a coping strategy. They are not without braggadocio. A Good Death depends upon the acceptance of mortality. Whitman still had to learn the art of dying well.

Anthropologist and author of *Denial of Death* Ernest Becker (rather cheekily) explains the underlying and essentially tense relationship between poetry and mortality:

Excreting is the curse that threatens madness because it shows man his abject finitude, his physicalness, the likely unreality of his hopes and dreams. But even more immediately, it represents man’s utter bafflement at the sheer *non-sense* of creation: to fashion the sublime miracle of the human face, the *mysterium tremendum* of radiant feminine beauty, the veritable goddesses that beautiful women are; to bring this out of nothing, out of the void, and make it shine in noonday; to take such a miracle and put miracles again within it, deep in the mystery of eyes that peer out—the eye that gave even dry Darwin a chill: to do all this, and to combine it with an anus that shits! It is too much. Nature mocks us, and poets live in torture.²⁰

Becker often theorizes in the mode of the Blues—making us laugh so that we forget to cry. Here, he jests, but he also reveals that the body is a problem for the poet to solve.²¹ In 1855, Walt

¹⁸ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 32.

¹⁹ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 86.

²⁰ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (1973, reprinted by the Free Press, 2023), 33.

²¹ Becker, *Denial*, 51-52.

Whitman wants us to believe that he does so effortlessly.²² But this is smoke and mirrors. The truth is that Whitman suffered from death anxiety like all mortals and, in order to avoid full psychosis and make something meaningful in the face of this mortality, he had to cling to something sturdier than sensationalism in his poetry. Despite his *Song of Myself* speaker's protests otherwise, Whitman's chosen (and effective) buoy was sentimentalism.²³ Later, Walt Whitman would personalize and push literary and moral sentimentalism until it became something new and more specific—a positive sociopolitical force he called, in the mode of the phrenologists, *adhesiveness*. In the following chapter on Walt Whitman and the American Civil War, I will study the origins of this specific subspecies of sentimentalism. But for now, I want to study Whitman's early interactions with antebellum sentimentalism and the product of these forays—his moving and delicate cluster *Live Oak, with Moss*.

In foregrounding the often sensational or polemical juvenilia of highly canonical writers like Walt Whitman, scholars like David S. Reynolds correct the erroneous but widely held belief that pre-Civil War American literature was essentially and overwhelmingly sentimental in nature.²⁴ Sentimental literature—or that which is largely concerned with emotional expression, the topoi of home, hearth, loss, and love, and society's 'down and out' characters—was not the sole project of the U.S. literati, but so much of it was extremely popular and socially influential.

²² In *The Body Beautiful*, Harold Aspiz exhaustively traces Whitman's fantasies about perfect health—“the myth of his quenchless vigor—” and asserts that any study of Whitman's *magnum opus* ought to start with the poet's treatment of the human body (24).

²³ Roughly thirty pages into the poem later called *Song of Myself*, the allegedly anonymous author of *Leaves of Grass* appears: “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, / Disorderly fleshy and sensual... eating and drinking and breeding, / No sentimentalist... no stander above men and women or apart from them... no more modest than immodest,” Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 50.

²⁴ In *Walt Whitman's America*, Reynolds provides some statistics: “Contrary to the once-held view that the antebellum literary scene was dominated by sentimental, ‘feminized,’ writings, about 60 percent of all fiction volumes published in America between 1831 and 1860 were highly wrought, adventurous, or satirical, while just over 20 percent were domestic or religious. About 70 percent of the volumes were by men, 23 percent by women, with 7 percent published anonymously,” 85.

Think, for example, of the verse of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow or the novel rumored to be responsible for the ignition of the Civil War with which we started this chapter—Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Before the early 1990s, this important body of work was largely ignored by the academe. Accusations of insincerity, exaggeration, and calculation all contributed to the stigmatization and satirization of the literary mode. In the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain popularized the mockery of sentimentalists like Emmeline Grangerford with her ‘tributes.’ Too, the stars of F.O. Matthiessen’s “American Renaissance” pantheon (vitality updated by subsequent scholars to include authors like Emily Dickinson and Frederick Douglass) tended (and tend) to steal the spotlight with their eccentric and experimental projects. *Moby-Dick* will never cease to excite the American imagination, for one key example. While some of this favoritism was (and is) understandable if not acceptable, Mary Louise Kete revealed the stakes of this nineteenth- and twentieth-century critical myopia when she demanded that we: “Imagine, for a moment, the exclusion of Wordsworth’s Lucy poems from considerations of the British Romantic period because of their focus on the ordinary, the domestic, or on loss, and you have imagined the nature of the gap that currently exists in conventional studies of American Romanticism.”²⁵ Since the publication of this remark in 2000, Kete’s own scholarship—in addition to that of earlier critics like Elizabeth Barnes, Nina Baym, and Susan K. Harris—has done much to close this gap.²⁶

When it comes to Walt Whitman and sentimentality, Jimmie Killingsworth and Michael Lasser, among others, have been hard at work revising the record. But still there is more to

²⁵ Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Duke University Press, 2000), 3.

²⁶ See, respectively: *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (1997), *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (1978), and *Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Novels: Interpretive Strategies* (1990).

uncover about Walt Whitman's relationship to literary sentimentality and how it played into his development of *adhesiveness* or the politically impactful love of comrades. Our imperfect understanding of Whitman's sentimentality is partially due to the poet's own obfuscations. In *Song of Myself* and elsewhere, Whitman actively distanced himself from the sentimentalists to emphasize his own artistic originality. But, as scholars like Robert Leigh Davis prove, *Leaves of Grass*, especially in its first issue, owed much to popular literary sentimentalism. For one example, the 1855 blooming cover is indebted to Fanny Fern (Sara Parton). Our lack of perfect insight into Walt Whitman's involvement with literary sentimentalism is further explained by the fact that the mode has long been exclusively associated with women. To be sure, women writers like Fanny Fern, Catharine Sedgwick, and Susan Warner achieved much in the sentimental mode and deserve to be more widely taught and anthologized— alongside that most famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example.

Walt Whitman imaginatively worked alongside these women writers in the sentimental mode. Throughout his life, the poet cherished a special affinity for women and women's work. The poet's disciple John Burroughs noted "a curious feminine undertone in him which revealed itself in the quality of his voice, the delicate texture of his skin, the gentleness of his touch and ways," and Whitman referred to himself as a "a great tender mother-man."²⁷ Toward the end of his life, in conversation with his friend and fan Edward Carpenter, Whitman went so far as to conclude that: "What lies behind *Leaves of Grass* is something that few, very few, only one here and there, perhaps oftenest women, are at all in a position to seize... There is something in my nature *furtive* like an old hen! You see a hen wandering up and down a hedgerow, looking apparently quite unconcerned, but presently she finds a concealed spot, and furtively lays an egg,

²⁷ Qtd. on Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (Simon and Schuster, 1980), 15.

and comes away as though nothing had happened. That is how I felt in writing *Leaves of Grass*.²⁸ The body of this dissertation focuses on the eggs that Whitman dropped late in his career—the verse clusters *Sands at Seventy* (1888) and *Good-Bye My Fancy* (1891) and how they function as an *Ars moriendi*.

To be sure, sentimental traces abound in the early *Leaves*. The following stretch of *Song of Myself* comes to mind:

The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside,
 I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,
 Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsey and weak,
 And went where he sat on a log, and led him in and assured him,
 And brought water and filled a tub for his sweated body and bruised feet,
 And gave him a room that entered from my own, and gave him some coarse clean
 clothes,
 And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,
 And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;
 He stayed with me a week before he was recuperated and fled north, I had him sit
 next to me at table...²⁹

Here, we see Whitman's gloriously expansive speaker nurse a pariah—that favored type of sentimental literature. Firmly in the sentimental mode, the speaker appeals to readers' emotions in describing the pitiful state of the refugee. This rare antislavery activity of Whitman's is akin to the "moralsuasion" tactics of freedom fighters and sometimes literary sentimentalists like

²⁸ Qtd. on Kaplan, *A Life*, 18.

²⁹ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 35-36.

Frederick Douglass in that it advocates certain behaviors—especially the exchange of empathy.³⁰

Clearly, the sentimentality of Whitman's early verse is worthy of close reading, but here, in this opening chapter of my dissertation, I will instead focus on the sentimentality of *Live Oak, with Moss*.³¹ Recently restored, *Live Oak, with Moss* is marrow of special importance to Whitman's final development of an American *Ars moriendi*. With its rich ores of sentimentality, *Live Oak, with Moss* is a pocketbook, personal version of Walt Whitman's *Ars moriendi*.

IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE, THERE IS A *LIVE OAK, WITH MOSS*:

Walt Whitman's achievement in the *Ars moriendi* begins with *Live Oak, with Moss*. This little book, an *Ars moriendi* in miniature, emerged from the severe internecine strife of the 1850s and demonstrates Whitman's antebellum engagement with the most positive elements of Victorian death culture and care. As far as we know, Walt Whitman never used the hair of his dead father for embroidery projects, but he did extensively and seriously meditate on the topoi of loss, love, emotional expression and fragility, home, and the meaning of human life in the face and full awareness of mortality—sentimental subjects essential to the art of dying well. As he approached midlife, Walt Whitman handcrafted a notebook (reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's fascicles) and inscribed twelve poems inside; *Live Oak, with Moss* was born. Later, the poet disassembled the collection, wrote 33 new poems, and, incorporating the *Live Oak* ingredients, created the *Calamus* cluster which debuted in the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*. He never published the original twelve as *Live Oak, with Moss*. It was almost a century after the first issue of *Leaves of Grass* that the scholar Fredson Bowers discovered *Live Oak, with Moss* in its

³⁰ Many contemporary Whitman fans have trouble reconciling the poet's egalitarian poetry with his often contradictory and sometimes racist prose and articulated private beliefs. There is no error; Walt Whitman espoused very different racial and political attitudes throughout his life and work. For more insight into this maelstrom, consult the encyclopedia entry entitled "Racial Attitudes" by George Hutchinson and David Drews on the *Walt Whitman Archive*: https://whitmanarchive.org/item/encyclopedia_entry44.

³¹ There are, for example, sentimental traces scattered all across the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* and in particular its *Messenger Leaves*.

integrity and introduced it to the literary profession. Still, the cluster received little critical attention for almost four more decades, and, as Karen Karbiener points out, the work is still largely unknown to general readers and even Whitman fans. This little outgrowth of *Leaves* has lived in relative obscurity.

Whitman's own disassembly and apparent disinterest in publishing *Live Oak, with Moss* explains this phenomenon. Since 1953, critics have offered countless explanations of Whitman's uncharacteristic reticence surrounding *Live Oak, with Moss*. In an authoritative afterword to the newly illustrated restoration of *Live Oak, with Moss* that she published with illustrator Brian Selznick, Karbiener outlines the dominant theory elucidating Whitman's burial of *Live Oak* as such:

For Whitman these poems were his first intense, sustained reflections on the love and attraction he felt for other men...In these dozen poems, Whitman attempts to establish a definition of same-sex love decades before the word 'homosexual' was in common parlance, and he dreams of a supportive community of lovers more than one hundred years before today's LGBTQ rights movement.³²

Karbiener is, of course, right. Generally speaking, a man attracted to other men, Walt Whitman was *less* not more safe as he aged and the nineteenth century progressed.³³ Fears about his

³² Karen Karbiener, "Remember Now Remember Then" (In *Live Oak, with Moss* by Walt Whitman with art by Brian Selznick, Abrams ComicArts, 2019), 137.

³³ In *Walt Whitman's America*, David S. Reynolds clarifies: "The sexual atmosphere before the Civil War was far more varied than is commonly believed. From a governmental standpoint, this was a hands-off period when, despite sporadic crackdowns by local authorities, moral regulations were few. There was no government-authorized moral police of the Anthony Comstock type, which after the Civil War crusaded against all kinds of explicit material, including Whitman's poetry" (195). He continues: "In the eighties and especially the nineties Whitman faced a somewhat changed moral atmosphere regarding same-sex love. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg shows, even though deep same-sex affection would be regarded as normal and acceptable in wide areas of American culture until the 1930s, it was in the 1880s that a previously unseen self-consciousness about it arose in some circles. The idea of 'sexual inversion' or 'contrary sexual instinct' began to have currency among doctors and intellectuals" (576-577). See chapters seven and sixteen of *Walt Whitman's America* whence I select these excerpts for a fuller purview of Whitman and sexuality in the long nineteenth century.

vulnerability and—much later in the century as such terminology came into medical and psychological parlance in Europe and then the United States— his sexuality may very well help explain Whitman’s decision to disassemble *Live Oak, with Moss*. But sexuality is not the sole subject of *Live Oak*. The cluster is also definitively obsessed with death.

The proof is in the poem. On the verso of a *Live Oak II* draft, Whitman hatches a plan for the project:

Poems

A cluster of poems, sonnets
expressing the thoughts, pictures,
aspirations, &c.

—

Fit to be perused during the
days of the approach
of Death.

—

(that I have prepared myself for that
purpose. —

—

(Remember now---

Remember then ---³⁴

³⁴ Qtd. on Karbiener, “Remember Now Remember Then,” 141.

In his project description— which Karbiener aptly dubs “a poem of its own” and which resembles a Dickinson poem on the page— Whitman declares *Live Oak* of special relevance to the one who is soon to die.³⁵ The poet proposes his own personal *Ars moriendi*.

The opening lines of *Live Oak, with Moss* feature a series of negatives: “Not the heat flames up and consumes, / Not the sea-waves hurry in and out, / Not the air, delicious and dry, the air of the ripe summer, bears lightly along white down-balls of myriads of seeds, wafted, sailing gracefully, to drop where they may, / ...more than my copious soul is borne through the open air, wafted in all directions, for friendship, for love.—”³⁶ And so Whitman initiates his private meditation on the power balance between annihilative and generative forces on earth; he launches his early and most personal inquiry into what it means to live and die well. Here we have additional insight into Whitman’s guard over *Live Oak, with Moss*. The poet is not just anxious about sexuality and romantic vulnerability. The poet is experiencing death anxiety. Fundamental to the human species, death anxiety can be a terrible thing, and it is on the threshing floor of *Live Oak* that Whitman tames and translates his own.

Sentimental poetry is often dismissed for being too dismal or despondent—for being death-obsessed.³⁷ In part, Whitman closeted this cluster because of its morbidity associated with literary sentimentality. The poet kept *Live Oak* private because it represented his own Garden of Gethsemane—the place in which he experienced and worked out his most serious doubts about poetic vocation and greater human meaning in the face of mortality. Scholars have made much of the studied and very much intentional kinship between the *Live Oak* poems and Shakespearean sonnets. I argue that as a body they represent a volta— a strong pivot towards deathcare in

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Walt Whitman, *Live Oak, with Moss* (with art by Brian Selznick and an afterword by Karen Karbiener, Abrams ComicArts, 2019), I.

³⁷ Here is a cultural manifestation of America’s death denial problem more fully addressed in the final chapter.

Whitman's poetic career. Karen Karbiener designates *Live Oak, with Moss* "a personal guidebook" and even speculates: Whitman may have envisioned 'Live Oak, with Moss' as a compact, intimate version of *Leaves of Grass*—a move from broad democratic spaces to private interiors."³⁸ Here she draws nigh the truth I am focused on: *Live Oak, with Moss* is the personal draft and pocket edition of Whitman's Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, his American *Ars moriendi*.

Since the cluster's revival in scholarly circles around the turn of the twenty-first century, poem VIII has attracted special attention from those eager for more insight into Whitman's sexuality. In poem VIII, the speaker (so often and understandably conflated with the author in Whitman studies) confesses: "Sullen and suffering hours— (I am ashamed—but it is useless—I am what I am;)." ³⁹ Considering the fact that so many *Live Oak* poems feature a male speaker expressing affection for an unidentified but definitely male paramour, many readers understand these lines to be Whitman's "coming out" as a gay man. In some, more historically precise ways, these lines are indeed Walt Whitman's uncommonly vulnerable confession about sexuality.⁴⁰ But they are also an echo of that awful revelation in Exodus 3:14: "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM."⁴¹ In other words, these lines demonstrate a being coming to terms with the very fact of being and not just, more specifically, sexuality. Psychoanalyst Otto Rank offered an interpretation of the Adam and Eve myth suggesting that sex was a sort of midwife to death. In other words, when humans discovered sex, they ushered in mortality. Rank's admirer and translator Ernest Becker confirms: "Sex is of the body, and the body is of death."⁴²

³⁸ Karbiener, "Remember Now, Remember Then," 137, 158.

³⁹ Whitman, *Live Oak*, VIII.

⁴⁰ We recall that this modern understanding of what it means to *identify* as gay/homosexual was not yet circulating in the U.S. at midcentury.

⁴¹ Exod. 3:14 KJV.

⁴² Becker, *Denial*, 162.

The work of Walt Whitman is too often exclusively associated with sex and not with its twin, death. Healthfully, it was Betsy Erkkila in 2011 who directed the field away from a previously dominant view of *Live Oak* as a straightforward narrative sequence (first proposed by Fredson Bowers). Poem VIII does seem to feature a breakup, but more importantly, with its temporal anaphora (“Hours... Hours... Hours...”), this piece of *Live Oak* is a much broader meditation on loss. On the page, this poem resembles an hourglass in shape. The indented form also brings to mind the image of a wave washing the shore. *Live Oak* writ large, and this poem in particular, are not linear but cyclical. Here, Whitman wonders about the permanence of loss on earth and the possibility of immortality or enduring human significance. Melancholic in tone, poem VIII, clearly inspired by the Shakespearean sonnet, is missing its concluding couplet. With this omission, Walt Whitman eschews finality and quietly chooses faith in immortality. Here, in his personal *Ars moriendi*—and while indulging sentimental longings for home in the form of another, beloved and lost person—Walt Whitman practices the defiant non-ending of “Good-Bye My Fancy.” I will close read this poem which concludes the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* in chapter three.

In the sixth poem of *Live Oak, with Moss*, Whitman reveals that these too are *Songs of Parting*, singing: “What think you I have taken my pen to record? / Not the battle-ship... / Not the splendors of the past day... / But the two men I saw to-day on the pier, parting the parting of dear friends. / The one to remain hung on the other’s neck and passionately kissed him—while the one to depart tightly prest the one to remain in his arms.”⁴³ But still one of the more noteworthy features of this sentimental verse cluster which makes it an *Ars moriendi* in miniature is its lengthy meditation on how to live a meaningful life. Specifically, many poems in *Live Oak*,

⁴³ Whitman, *Live Oak*, VI.

with *Moss*, weigh public against private success. Ernest Becker summarizes the uniquely terrible position in which man, member of a self-aware species, finds himself:

Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet. This immense expansion, this dexterity, this ethereality, this self-consciousness gives to man literally the status of small god in nature, as the Renaissance thinkers knew. Yet, at the same time, as the Eastern sages also knew, man is a worm and food for worms. This is the paradox: he is out of nature and hopelessly in it...⁴⁴

It is this paradox which the poetry of *Live Oak* faces.

Dwelling on sentimental subjects of home and happiness, Whitman's speaker obsesses over what it means to be truly satisfied. Memorably, in poem three, the speaker makes a choice:

When I heard at the close of the day how I had been praised in the Capitol, still it
 was not a happy night for me that followed;
 And else, when I caroused—Or when my plans were accomplished—it was well
 enough—Still I was not happy;
 But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health, electric, inhaling
 sweet breath...
 When I wandered alone over the beach, and undressing, bathed, laughing with the
 waters, and saw the sun rise,
 And when I thought how my friend, my lover, was coming, then I was happy...

⁴⁴ Becker, *Denial*, 26.

And that night in the stillness his face was inclined toward me, while the moon's
clear beams shone,

And his arm lay lightly over my breast— And that night I was happy.⁴⁵

This is a very clear elevation of personal over public success. And again in poem V, the speaker claims:

Long I thought that knowledge alone would suffice me...

Then my lands engrossed me—For them I would live—I would be their orator...

And then to finish all, it came to me to strike up the songs of the New World—

And then I believed my life must be spent in singing;

But now take notice, Land of the prairies, Land of the south savannas, Ohio's
land,

Take notice, you Kanuck woods—and you, Lake Huron—and all that with you
roll toward Niagara—and you Niagara also,

And you, Californian mountains—that you all find someone else that he be your
singer of songs,

For I can be your singer of songs no longer—I have passed ahead—I have ceased
to enjoy them...

I am indifferent to my own songs—I am to go with him I love, and he is to go
with me,

It is to be enough for each of us that we are together—We never separate again.

—⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Whitman, *Live Oak*, III.

⁴⁶ Whitman, *Live Oak*, V.

It is the scarcity of time that forces humans to choose—perhaps differently each day—which gauges they will use to measure their success. Whitman’s is a distinct meditation on mortality. This meditation is conducted in the *Live Oak* triptych crowned by poem VII. Once more, Whitman’s speaker firmly prioritizes his personal over his professional life, demanding: “You bards of ages hence! when you refer to me, mind not so much my poems... / Publish my name and hang up my picture as that of the tenderest lover... / Who was not proud of his songs, but of the measureless ocean of love within him.”⁴⁷ Walt Whitman eventually recycles these poems and issues them as part of the *Calamus* cluster in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*— III transforms into *Calamus* 11, V becomes 8, and VII becomes 10.⁴⁸ Still later, Whitman drops V and VIII from *Leaves of Grass*. The abandonment of V is evidence of Whitman’s equilibrium. Eventually finding both personal and professional success with his poetry, Whitman assumes his vocation in the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* and offers a lengthier, more measured meditation on the meanings of life there. Taken altogether in the brief booklet *Live Oak, with Moss*, this trio of poems is a meditation at fever pitch. Cloistered, these pieces are extremely and—so Whitman thought— maybe even dangerously personal.

Assuming that Whitman is the speaker of *Live Oak*, we know that he did not keep these commitments to companionship at the expense of composition. He never stopped writing and revising poetry. Walt Whitman never ended his public life. This devotion—the eventual achievement of his public *Ars moriendi* in the form of the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*— was made possible by the imaginative space of *Live Oak, with Moss*. In this closeted cluster, Whitman tries on life without poetry for size and realizes just how essential it is to a meaningful

⁴⁷ Whitman, *Live Oak*, VII.

⁴⁸ In the next chapter of this dissertation, we will spend time with one of Whitman’s Civil War poems called “To a Certain Civilian” which also echoes this meditation on the frustrating incompatibility of personal and professional success.

human life. *Live Oak, with Moss* is a threshing floor. Herein, Whitman also considers that alleged dichotomy between the body and the soul—the one the poet wanted us to believe gave him no trouble in 1855. In the titular poem of this cluster, Whitman considers his corporeal similarity to a live oak: “And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself. “Only, Whitman notes a distinction between the spirit and the letter of his live oak kinship, protesting: “But I wondered how it could utter joyous leaves, standing alone there without its friend, its lover—For I knew that I could not.”⁴⁹ In the next chapter, and in the Civil War’s wounded wards, we will see Whitman formulate his adhesive agent which will eventually allow him to bridge the gap between the body and the soul. There, we will earn a greater understanding of the poetic power of apostrophe—a tried and true sentimental strategy featured in *Live Oak X* and throughout *Leaves of Grass*.

Live Oak, with Moss is essentially an effort in remembrance. Of the titular, Louisiana live oak, Whitman poignantly recollects: “And I plucked a twig with a certain number of leaves upon it, and twined around it a little moss, and brought it away—And I have placed it in sight in my room, / It is not needed to remind me as of my friends, (for I believe lately I think of little else than of them,) / Yet it remains to me a curious token—I write these pieces, and name them after it.”⁵⁰ This habit of remembrance is an exercise in mortality. Whitman steepes himself in personal grief in *Live Oak, with Moss* and learns to carry it. These hard-won lessons in memory and mourning direct Walt Whitman’s late style and help explain, for example, his habit of annotating and dating the twilight poems of *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*. *Live Oak IV* is a sentimental reverie about finding a home on earth,⁵¹ and in XI, addressing the planet directly,

⁴⁹ Whitman, *Live Oak*, II.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ This poem also represents a heightened interest in international affairs on Whitman’s part. The cosmopolitanism of his late verse is a subject of subsequent chapters.

Whitman once again displays death anxiety when he cries: “Earth! My likeness! Though you look so impassive, ample, and spheric there, — I now suspect that is not all, / I now suspect there is something terrible in you, ready to break forth... / I dare not tell it in words—not even in these songs.”⁵² This very human fear about what is unsaid and unsayable will be worked out in the wounded wards and likewise affect the development of Walt Whitman’s late style.

In sum—despite the cluster’s title which boasts animation— the poems of *Live Oak, with Moss* are about death. And in the cluster’s final piece, Whitman summons his “eleves—” or the students who would, with him, learn the art of dying well. Scholars and general readers alike are fortunate to have *Live Oak, with Moss* as Whitman originally imagined it. The restored version is perfectly brief, gut-wrenching, and relatable. For this latter reason, I think that Whitman would be glad his private book is finally made public. But for those who would indeed learn the *Ars moriendi*, Whitman offers a much fuller and richer textbook in the form of the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Walt Whitman was an Egyptology pupil and visitor to the collection of Dr. Henry Abbott (a collection which included many Egyptian funerary items). Justin Kaplan considers Whitman’s connection to ancient Egypt and its funeral culture in particular:

On his deathbed the Frenchman Jean François Champollion, who unlocked ancient Nilotic culture by deciphering the Rosetta Stone, pointed to the manuscript of his *Grammar of Egyptian Hieroglyphics* and said, ‘Be careful of this—it is my carte de visite to posterity.’ This was the way Whitman was to describe his own book, ‘my definitive carte visite to posterity.’ *Leaves of Grass* was a modern Book of the Dead, in Whitman’s day also titled ‘the book of going forth in the day’ (possibly echoed in his line, ‘There was a child went forth every day’).⁵³

⁵² Whitman, *Live Oak*, XI.

⁵³ Kaplan, *A Life*, 170

Moving toward his public Book of the Dead, Whitman chose as a representative the Calamus plant over the Live Oak. As Karbiener points out, the former plant has a much wider range and is therefore more symbolically accessible to a wider array of Americans. Walt Whitman was always thinking of his countrymen and beloved readers. As he surely knew, the Southeastern live oak was never really alone. He admits: “I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing, / All alone stood it, and the moss hung down from the branches, / Without any companion, it grew there glistening out with joyous leaves of dark green.”⁵⁴ The moss stands quiet vigil, keeps faithful company with the live oak. Whitman’s cluster, named for this symbiotic relationship, is a fine demonstration of the subversive power of sentimental literature.⁵⁵ Literary sentimentalism is a strategy which binds mortals together in the face of inevitable grief; sentimental literature, like *Live Oak*, is exchanged in a gift economy. Clearly, Whitman learned much from antebellum deathcare strategies like sentimentality. But before he could offer his country his greatest gift—the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, an American *Ars moriendi*—he had to watch that country tear itself apart in one of the world’s bloodiest civil wars.

⁵⁴ Whitman, *Live Oak*, II.

⁵⁵ Abraham Lincoln was only partly kidding when he first greeted Harriet Beecher Stowe as “the little woman who wrote the book that started this great big war.” See: <https://ehistory.osu.edu/articles/harriet-beecher-stowe-little-woman-who-wrote-book-started-great-war>.

Raised by his freethinking father to admire Thomas Paine, whose *Common Sense* is not without its sentimental ores, Whitman was sure of the power of literary sentimentality.

CHAPTER TWO: THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR AND THE BEGINNINGS OF WALT WHITMAN'S LATE STYLE

*What deep wounds ever closed without a scar?
The heart's bleed longest, and but heal to wear
That which disfigures it...*
Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III¹

INTRODUCTION TO WALT WHITMAN AND THE CIVIL WAR

Christopher Hager and Cody Marrs have identified the year 1865 as the preeminent broken promise of literary periodization. In theory, the marker pledges to preserve something of the cultural cataclysm with which the American Civil War confronted nineteenth-century citizens and later critics in a national curriculum. Pedagogically, 1865 is supposed to represent a rupture. But in effect, the year continues to artificially amputate extended careers—like that of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, and Walt Whitman— so that they might fit in anthologies demarked by distinct “antebellum” and “postbellum” periods. This violence is epistemic, and it is costly. Of course, as the Hager-Marrs team suggests—and as my dissertation aims to help correct—1865 threatens to cost students of American literature both vital context and contact with late-career texts like Herman Melville’s *Timoleon*. Taken as an unforgiving marker of distinction, the year 1865 also threatens to efface if not erase the fact that victory was never guaranteed for the Union. The vital celebration of Juneteenth as a national holiday is an annual reminder that for many people the American Civil War did not end in April 1865 or anywhere

¹ George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: A Romaunt* (1812-1818, reprinted in *Lord Byron: Selected Poems*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning, Penguin Books, 1996), 443.

near Appomattox. Each bellicose year of the 1860s, not to mention the bleeding 1850s, delivered its share of deaths that are overshadowed by the monolith 1865.

For Walt Whitman and his family, the war's nadir arrived in December of 1862 when George Washington Whitman was listed as a casualty of the 51st New York in the Battle of Fredericksburg. One of the Union's most devastating defeats, The Battle of Fredericksburg resulted in 13,000 federal casualties—compared to less than 5,000 on the Confederate side. The grisly conflict compelled even the victorious General Robert E. Lee to reflect: "It is well that war is so terrible—we should grow too fond of it!"² Historian James McPherson emphasizes the effect on the home front: "Fredericksburg brought home the horrors of war to northerners more vividly, perhaps, than any previous battle."³ This was certainly true for the Whitmans of Brooklyn. Terrified and unsure of the exact nature of his brother's injury, Walt Whitman headed south from Brooklyn in search of George—or George's body. In a Falmouth, Virginia army camp, the poet finally located his beloved brother alive and quite well. George had only received a superficial wound to his cheek during the conflict at Fredericksburg. However, before the happy conclusion of his exhaustive fraternal search, Walt Whitman had scoured army hospitals around Washington, D.C. He did not find George among the wards of the wounded there, but he did find his vocation in nursing.

Following Fredericksburg and a brief sojourn with his brother in camp, Walt Whitman wandered the wards of Civil War hospitals for three years, serving as an amanuensis, cook, comforter, and wound-dresser to Union and "Secesh" soldiers alike—often while draped in his best wine-colored suit. Throughout his tenure, Whitman penciled poems and bits of prose on scraps of paper hurried into his pockets—scraps he would later develop and collect into the

² Qtd. by James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: the Civil War Era* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 572.

³ McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 572-574.

books *Drum-Taps* (1865) and *Memoranda During the War* (1876). These years were fulfilling to Whitman as both a person and a poet, but they came at a tremendous bodily and spiritual cost.

Decades later, Whitman viscerally remembers this transaction in a rare prose preface to *Good-Bye My Fancy* (1891), the cluster of verse which coronates the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's conclusions are striking:

Then behind all, the deep-down consolation (it is a glum one, but I dare not be sorry for the fact of it in the past, nor refrain from dwelling, even vaunting here at the end) that this late-years palsied old shorn and shell-fish condition of me is the indubitable outcome and growth, now near for 20 years along, of too overzealous, over-continued bodily and emotional excitement and action through the times of 1862, '3, '4, and '5, visiting and waiting on wounded and sick army volunteers, both sides, in campaigns or contests, or after them, or in hospitals or fields south of Washington City, or in that place and elsewhere—those hot, sad, wrenching times— the army volunteers, all States, — or North or South — the wounded, suffering, dying, — the exhausting, sweating summers, marches, battles, carnage—those trenches hurriedly heap'd by the corpse-thousands, mainly unknown—Will the America of the future— will this vast rich Union ever realize what itself cost, back there after all? — those hecatombs of battle-deaths— Those times of which, O far-off reader, this whole book is indeed finally but a reminiscent memorial from thence by me to you?⁴

To be sure, this is Walt Whitman, at the fin de siècle, claiming that the American Civil War forms the very heart of his *magnum opus* and is at the core of *Leaves of Grass*—not just 1865's

⁴ Walt Whitman, 1891-1892 *Leaves of Grass* (1891-1892, reprinted in *The Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, edited by Justin Kaplan, 147-672, The Library of America, 1982, represented as "Deathbed LoG" in subsequent footnotes), 638.

stand-alone *Drum-Taps*. To his end, Whitman maintains: “This [the Civil War] is the very centre, circumference, umbilicus, of my whole career.”⁵ Hitherto, we have understood Whitman to mean that the Civil War is a kind of scar marking, if not marring, his career and canon. There is truth to that interpretation. In the preceding meditation from *Good-Bye My Fancy*, we recognize the poet’s syntactically fractured recollection. What is this rhythmic change in Whitman’s articulation but a reverberation of the war’s violence? Still, we ought to remember that the umbilicus is also a memory of vital connection—it is a point of origin. And the American Civil War proved the genesis of Walt Whitman’s distinct, and deeply compelling, late style.

As we see in the preface to *Good-Bye My Fancy*, Walt Whitman spent much of his final stint in Camden meditating on the war. Horace Traubel, a close comrade of Whitman’s and the writer responsible for the nine-volume biographical series *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, often accompanied the old poet on his imaginative sojourns back to the 1860s. Traubel remembers: “I asked W.: ‘Do you go back to those days?’ [He replied:] ‘I do not need to. I have never left them. They are here, now, while we are talking together—real, terrible, beautiful days!’”⁶ This homecoming phenomenon is our hint. There is an intimate connection between Walt Whitman’s late period, or his Camden years, and the Civil War. The American Civil War was the crucible in which Walt Whitman developed his late style and discovered purpose in his lifelong fascination with death—an obsession largely responsible for his antebellum cluster *Live Oak, with Moss*. In the following chapter, I will survey and extend existent scholarship on wartime Whitman and his unique poetic process. Then, I will trace the origins of Walt Whitman’s late style—largely

⁵ Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman’s Civil War* (edited by Walter Lowenfels with drawings by Winslow Homer, 1961, reprinted in unabridged form, Da Capo Press, 1989), 15.

⁶ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (vol. I, Small, Maynard & Company, 1906), 115.

characterized by its sentimentality, brevity, annotations, imagism, and heightened spirituality—in the poems of *Drum-Taps*. Finally, I will focus on Whitman’s myriad connections to the field of medical humanities as I prepare to pivot in the following chapters and analyze how Whitman’s late style functions as an *Ars moriendi* that might prove essentially corrective to twenty-first-century healthcare patients and providers.

“FITS AND STARTS:” UNDERSTANDING WARTIME WHITMAN

The American Civil War was particularly devastating to the author of *Leaves of Grass*. Peter Coviello sums up the war’s impact: “For an expressivist-erotic utopianism such as [Whitman’s] the war was, in virtually all the ways one can imagine, a catastrophic rebuke.” Coviello explains that the war required Walt Whitman to initiate a “pained recalibration” of his poetics.⁷ Literary critics have spent well over a century trying to make sense of this recalibration, or as Martin Buinicki might phrase it, of Whitman’s endless reconstructions. Coviello and Buinicki are just two of a multitude of scholars with whom I will converse as I extend this effort and offer additional insight into Whitman’s postwar poetics which featured countless stylistic and thematic changes—such as an altered emphasis on the body, a topic I will turn to shortly. What is finally clear is the fact that Walt Whitman was not passive, but a participant in the alteration of his style. In this dissertation, I add: Walt Whitman forged his late style out of his country’s cataclysmic crisis at midcentury.

The war devastated Whitman both physically and emotionally; his was a hyperabundance of grief at the merciless destruction of his 1855 vision of national adhesion and affection. But the presence of the poet’s grief does not mean that the war years, and certainly not 1865 alone, marked an end for Whitman. Rather, this bellicose season witnessed the beginning of Whitman’s

⁷ Peter Coviello, “Civil War” (In *Walt Whitman in Context*, edited by Joanna Levin and Edward Whitley, 269-277, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 272.

carefully cultivated end. Walt Whitman found a workshop among the wounded, and he appreciated the special ruggedness of his wartime writings. Introducing the poet's own "little improvised note-books of the war-time," Horace Traubel records Whitman's old-age reflections on his drafting process from those days:

I carried sometimes half a dozen such books in my pocket at one time—never was without one of them: I took notes as I went along—often as I sat—talking, maybe, as with you here, now, I writing while the other fellow told his story. I would take the best paper (you can see, the best I could find) and make it up into these books tying them with string or tape or getting someone (often it was Nellie O' Connor) to stitch them for me. My little books were beginnings—they were the ground into which I dropped the seed... *Drum-Taps* was all written in that manner—all of it—put together by fits and starts, on the field, in the hospitals, as I worked with the soldier boys.⁸

Fits and starts, indeed. The 1860s saw Whitman temporarily depart from *Leaves of Grass* to publish *Drum-Taps* as a stand-alone volume. He also uniquely appended a *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, which included the famous elegies for Abraham Lincoln "O Captain! My Captain!" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Too, the poet published individual poems in periodicals during the war years.⁹ "The Errand-Bearers," later "A Broadway pageant" in *Drum-Taps*, first appeared in the *New York Times* on June 27th, 1860. "Beat! Beat! Drums!," for another example, appeared in *Harper's Weekly* on September 21st, 1861. It was reprinted in the *New York Leader*, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, and more papers across the

⁸ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (vol. II, D. Appelton, 1908), 137.

⁹ The poet's serious engagement with nineteenth-century periodical culture began in earnest around 1860 as Whitman promoted the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, continued during the war years, and then, as we will see in the following chapter, intensified toward the end of Whitman's life and in advance of the annexes *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*.

country. Whitman's poetic process was so irregular during the war and in its wake—indeed an improvisation—that he actually missed President Lincoln's funeral train while tending to *Drum-Taps*.

Lincoln's funeral train, an elaborate procession designed with mourning *en masse* in mind, toured eleven major cities with minor stops in between. In D.C., Baltimore, Harrisburg, New York, Albany, Buffalo, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, Chicago, and Springfield, countless throngs of mourners caught one last glimpse of Abraham Lincoln. Martha Hodes provides some estimates: "Everywhere the lines were frightfully long and time permitted in the casket's presence astonishingly short. In New York, more than 100 people filed by each minute, in Cleveland perhaps 180 per minute across fifteen hours. In Philadelphia, some 300,000 caught a glimpse. In Chicago, 7,000 people saw the body each hour the coffin remained open, in Columbus, 8,000. All in all, perhaps a million people glanced at Lincoln, each for no more than a second or two."¹⁰ These numbers do not account for the innumerable individuals who performed more private or local acts of mourning for the president, or those who merely wanted a glimpse of the train that carried his remains. Still, one was missing from this multitude. Despite his famous love for the late president, Walt Whitman did not attend these last rites and rituals. He was tied up in New York, at Bradstreet's Bindery, delaying the debut of *Drum-Taps* until he could compose a worthy Lincoln lament.¹¹ First, Whitman tried to satisfy himself by adding "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day" to the volume, and he even made a twenty-dollar payment on the publication. Still, he thought, *Drum-Taps* had to be delayed.

Further disrupting his process, Whitman also experimented with regular rhyme and meter during the American Civil War. He continuously blurred the boundary between poetry and prose.

¹⁰ Martha Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln* (Yale University Press, 2015), 156.

¹¹ Roy Morris, *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 220-221.

After all, both the poems of *Drum-Taps* and the prose sketches of *Memoranda During the War* were borne out of Whitman's hospital scraps and those homemade booklets. Pieces like "Song of the Banner at Daybreak" are at once poems, parables, and closet dramas. But not all of this genre-bending activity was new for Whitman. Since its 1855 debut, *Leaves of Grass* was a generic controversy. Many of Whitman's early readers refused to acknowledge—or were unable to recognize—Whitman's poems as such. Accustomed to the rhymed and metered serenity of the Fireside Poets, nineteenth-century American readers did not know how to respond to this Walt Whitman, son of Manhattan, with his sensuous and so-called free verse. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* famously received thoughtful feedback from fast fans like Ralph Waldo Emerson, but it also met with its share of vitriolic reactions and rejections. While Whitman was very often, and sometimes quite publicly, wounded by this criticism of himself and his *magnum opus*, he also mustered up some amusement at the persistence of his misunderstanding. Musing again to Horace Traubel in Camden, Whitman remarked: "Many even of my friends won't call *Leaves of Grass* poems: they like me, it — think I am, it is, something, some even say something considerable, but they won't admit it is poetry."¹²

Though his countrymen came to expect literary curiosities from Walt Whitman, he still managed to surprise them with his wartime verse. Compared to the mass of poetry produced out of the American experience of war, *Drum-Taps* is an aberration. In the poem originally called by its first line and later retitled "To a Certain Civilian," Whitman almost cruelly demands: "Did you ask dulcet rhymes from me? / Did you find what I sang erewhile so hard to follow... / What to such as you anyhow such a poet as I, therefore leave my works, / And go lull yourself with

¹² Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman Speaks: His Final Thoughts on Life, Writing, Spirituality, and the Promise of America as told to Horace Traubel* (edited by Brenda Wineapple, New York: Library of America, 2019), 57.

what you can understand.”¹³ Of course, in so demanding answers from his audience members, Whitman defuses his threatened rejection of them. But this newfound intensity, or cruelty, bespeaks a larger truth about Whitman’s wartime verse, a fact easily stated: it is very weird war poetry.

The American Civil War, like countless conflicts before it, inspired innumerable poems. But evaluating this tremendous body of poetry, critic Edmund Wilson complains: “The period of the Civil War was not at all a favorable one for poetry. An immense amount of verse was written in connection with the war itself, but today it makes barren reading.”¹⁴ Wilson thought so, because so many of these American Civil War poems reported news from the front or painstakingly restaged major battles.¹⁵ An anonymous author’s contribution to the *Richmond Sentinel* called “Chickamauga, ‘The Stream of Death’” and Henry Howard Brownell’s “The Bay Fight” are examples of poems in this mode. Early in the war, Northern and Southern poets alike also penned recruitment poems. To this body of work including pieces like Richard Henry Stoddard’s “To the Men of the North and West” and James R. Randall’s “My Maryland,” Walt Whitman actually contributed. In the title poem of the 1865 version of *Drum-Taps*, Whitman proudly cries:

¹³ Walt Whitman, *Drum-Taps* (1865, republished as *Drum-Taps: The Complete 1865 Edition*, edited, annotated, and with an introduction by Lawrence Kramer, 3-132, New York Review Books, 2015), 65.

¹⁴ Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* (Andre Deutsch, 1962), 466.

¹⁵ In her recent monograph *Battle Lines: Poetry and Mass Media in the U.S. Civil War*, Eliza Richards vitally nuances and contextualizes Edmund Wilson’s survey of the poetry he denigrates as “versified journalism” (479). Therein, Richards, a more generous and incisive reader, investigates the impact that the twin rise of mass media and distinctly modern warfare had on American poetry during the U.S. Civil War. She argues that the two phenomena, both of which bound the country up in complicated circulatory networks, are directly responsible for a proliferation of experimental poetry. She reveals that much of the popular poetry dismissed by Wilson, like that of Henry Howard Brownell, vitally partakes in and demonstrates this experimentation for which authors like Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman get exclusive contemporary credit. While she only briefly treats Whitman through a passage from *Specimen Days* and his “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun,” Richards’s book is broadly important to my thinking. For, in *Battle Lines*, Richards contemplates a boundary that is an essential question for Whitman and Whitman scholars—and an increasingly important query as both he and his art age. That is the separation between the battle and home fronts, or, more broadly construed, between the public and the private selves. Richards helps me understand and translate this boundary in Whitman’s late clusters. I direct my readers to *Battle-Lines* for insight into the ties which do bind *Drum-Taps* to its contemporaries. Richards agrees: *Drum-Taps* is exemplary but not autochthonic or completely independent of the impact of mass media and modern warfare felt so keenly by poets like Brownell or James R. Randall.

“First, O songs, for a prelude, / Lightly strike on the stretch’d tympanum, pride and joy in my city, / How she led the rest to arms—how she gave the cue... / How Manhattan drum-taps led.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, this poem proves an outlier in *Drum-Taps*. In fact, when integrated into the body of *Leaves of Grass*, this introductory poem of *Drum-Taps* was retitled, called by its first line which emphasizes its temporality, its datedness, and its eventual failure to satisfy the bard.¹⁷ The poem’s indulgence of anaphora is another clue that the piece belongs to a bygone era or Whitman’s early style which shines brightest in *Song of Myself*.

Whitman’s wartime pivot is captured in the pitch of the following lines, which formed an epigraph for the cluster *Drum-Taps* in the 1871 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, but which were later relocated and housed within the poem “The Wound-Dresser”: “(Arous’d and angry, I’d thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war, / But soon my fingers fail’d me, my face droop’d, and I resign’d myself, / To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead;).”¹⁸ There is no sound here. The dresser leaves behind the drums and the din of battle to sit by the silent and the suffering. Here, he suggests, we might only hear such desperate whispers: “(Come, sweet death! be persuaded, O beautiful death! / In mercy come quickly.)”¹⁹ In *Drum-Taps*, we first hear the *Whispers of Heavenly Death*. Whitman’s war poetry is characterized by such eerie quiet. It is imagistic and mostly unconcerned with battles or bullets, apart from their consequences. No longer interested in writing partisan poetry like Henry Timrod with his “Ethnogenesis” or Julia Ward Howe with her most famous “Battle Hymn of the Republic,”

¹⁶ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 3.

¹⁷ For a model in analyzing and appreciating Whitman’s poetic changes so often made in the name of universality or enduring relevance—and for greater insight into Whitman’s publications in periodicals—see “Walt Whitman’s Poetry in Periodicals” by Susan Belasco at *The Walt Whitman Archive*: [https://whitmanarchive.org/item/anc.00268#:~:text=%22You%20and%20Me%20and%20To,Grass%20\(1881%E2%80%939382\).](https://whitmanarchive.org/item/anc.00268#:~:text=%22You%20and%20Me%20and%20To,Grass%20(1881%E2%80%939382).)

¹⁸ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 442-443.

¹⁹ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 38.

Whitman aimed to produce a poetry rooted in the *via media*—one characterized by such openness and peaceful quiet as to welcome nonpartisan reflection.²⁰

Rather than argue that the Muse and God were allied against the Confederacy or the Union, Whitman decided to paint a picture of a “Cavalry Crossing a Ford.” He looked up — far above the “Bivouac on a mountainside” — “And over all the sky—the sky! far, far out of reach, studded, breaking out, the eternal stars.”²¹ Homeric allusions— and especially those referring to sky, sea, and ships— abound in *Drum-Taps*, but the verse is not Homeric. Not about heroes or homelands, Whitman’s wartime poetry is a world of ideas, a made space for spiritual, and universal, reflection. The poetry presses pause on military action, and thus, the collection makes for an ideal transitional space between Whitman’s early and late styles when it is placed in the middle of *Leaves of Grass*. In both its independent and integrated forms, *Drum-Taps* introduces the reader to the more meditative mode they will meet in the late clusters like *Sands at Seventy*. For example, “Quicksand years that whirl me I know not whither” primes readers to brave “Queries to My Seventieth Year” in *Sands at Seventy*. In the former, wartime Whitman wonders: “Out of politics, triumphs, battles, death—what at last finally remains? / When shows break up, what but One’s-Self is sure?”²² In *Drum-Taps*, the poet introduces existential curiosity

²⁰ This move is especially striking considering Walt Whitman’s antebellum career as an often fiercely partisan journalist. Jimmie M. Killingsworth reflects on these contradictions and on Whitman’s career as a newspaper man: “Much work remains to be done on Whitman’s journalism. Though selections appear... no complete collection of extant work, comparable to Floyd Stovall’s edition of the prose works, exists... Nor has any biographer or critic fully accounted for the continuities and discontinuities between Whitman the poet and Whitman the journalist, though the differences have fascinated scholars since Whitman’s own day.” For my own part, I attribute the nonpartisan mode of the poetry to its late *Ars moriendi* mode and mission. The success of this genre depends on its appeal to the universals of the human condition.

Killingsworth, M. Jimmie, "Journalism, Whitman's" (*The Walt Whitman Archive*, gen. ed. Matt Cohen, Ed Folsom, & Kenneth M. Price, accessed 05 March 2025, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org>).

²¹ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 95.

²² Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 35.

but presents identity as a pillar. Buoyed here, readers are stronger and better equipped to question senescence alongside the aging poet in the first appendix *Sands at Seventy*:

Approaching, nearing, curious,
 Thou dim, uncertain spectre—bringest thou life or death?
 Strength, weakness, blindness, more paralysis and heavier?
 Or placid skies and sun? Wilt stir the waters yet?
 Or haply cut me short for good? Or leave me here as now,
 Dull, parrot-like and old, with crack'd voice and harping, screeching?²³

In the following section, I will locate *Drum-Taps* umbilici for the poetic phenomena which define Walt Whitman's late style epitomized by the twilight clusters *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*.

PROTO-POETICS: THE EMERGENCE OF WHITMAN'S LATE STYLE

It is in *Drum-Taps* that Whitman tinkers with, and successfully transforms, his would-be cosmically representative "I" — the one that so exuberantly introduces *Song of Myself*: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."²⁴ For it is in the war that Walt Whitman truly learns to be a witness to the experiences of others. Wandering wounded wards, Whitman realized that the poet's duty is not to *do* all of the imaginative exploration and expression for his readers, but instead to invite and inspire individual reminiscences and imaginative sojourns. The poet's purpose is to grant that permission, to certify the worthiness of imaginative endeavors. Gone are Whitman's days of making such bombastic, ultimately unsatisfying claims: "I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs, / Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the

²³ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 615.

²⁴ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 188.

marksmen, / Agonies are one of my changes of garments.”²⁵ In making this argument, I extend the work of Robert Leigh Davis who sums up the war’s impact on the ego who animates *Song of Myself*:

Whitman had attempted nothing less than an ‘epical presentation of democracy’ in 1855. Containing multitudes, ‘Song of Myself’ is, if nothing else, a native epic meant to rival the classical tradition of Virgil’s *Aeneid* as well as the Christian tradition of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Relinquishing that ambition, Whitman cultivates a self-conscious incompleteness in his Civil War writings... Whitman now sees and writes in pieces, in ‘fragmentary excerpts.’ This is the principal shift in Whitman’s late career, the principle difference in his writings before and after the war... this change is not confined to Whitman’s prose.²⁶

In his later poems—which are apparent pieces when compared to the mass of *Song of Myself* or what once constituted a Whitman verse—Whitman determines to, simply, sit by the bedside as witness whether one suffers or, however imaginatively, soars. And he considers what items or images he might collect and preserve in poetry—which of memory’s fragments—in order that he might catalyze emotional mining or transformative experience in his readers. In the war, Whitman wonders: how can poetry preserve and transmit the experiences of others when those experiences are so multiform and cruel? What kind of poetry might empower readers to recognize their neighbor’s trials and triumphs as their own—to realize and accept the cost of mutual responsibility, of what Emerson called the Oversoul? *Drum-Taps*, and later, *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy* are his answers to these complicated questions.

²⁵ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 225.

²⁶ Robert Leigh Davis, *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* (University of California Press, 1997), 111-112.

In *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins chronologize the distinction between the speaker and the author of a poem that is so often taken for granted in the twenty-first century. Explaining that the distance between the two was established by New Critics like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, the pair elucidates: “In the middle of the [twentieth] century, that first-person subject of the poem came to be called ‘the speaker,’ a dramatic persona considered a fiction made for the purposes of the poem. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith has pointed out, the advantage of thinking about (and teaching) ‘the lyric I’ as a speaker or a dramatic fiction is that ‘the context of a fictive utterance... is understood to be *historically indeterminate*.’ A fictional person of all times and places, the first-person speaker of the lyric could speak to no one in particular and thus to all of us.”²⁷ Here is Walt Whitman’s ambition—though, of course, he could not have articulated it in terms of New Criticism. Rather, Whitman would have likely referred to his ambition as a variety of what John Keats called ‘Negative Capability—’ or an artist’s ability to thrive in essentially liminal spaces and modes. A ‘Chameleon Poet’ across the Atlantic Ocean, Walt Whitman invites readers to recognize the speaker of his poems as such—as an invention.²⁸ Some of Whitman’s lines, like those from *Song of Myself* about being a hounded slave, are most obvious inventions. But others in the same poem seem strictly autobiographical. First, Whitman offers: “I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin, / Hoping to cease not till death.”²⁹ And later, he delves into even more specifics: “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking

²⁷ Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, “General Introduction,” (In *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 5.

²⁸ For a refresher on these key Keats terms, see: <https://poets.org/glossary/negative-capability>.

²⁹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 188.

and breeding, / No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them, / No more modest than immodest.”³⁰

From the beginning in 1855, Whitman’s goal with *Leaves of Grass* was broad, even universal, representativeness. Long after the launch of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman tries to explain the original anonymity of the volume to Horace Traubel: “It would be a sacrilege to put a name there [on the title page]— it would seem just like putting a name on the universe... at the most I am only the mouthpiece...I like the feeling of a general partnership—as if the *Leaves* was anybody’s who chooses just as truly as mine.”³¹ Although the volume was published anonymously, readers did not have too much trouble reckoning a potential author. Almost immediately, they would meet the poet’s name in the aforementioned lines of the poem ultimately called *Song of Myself*. Whitman was still reaching for representativeness, and he finally begins to reconcile the relevance of individual identity to the collective during the American Civil War. The poet does so by intensifying his gaze. In the poems of *Drum-Taps*, Whitman mutes all sound and narrows his gaze upon the body in death. Michael Moon confirms that in *Drum-Taps*, Whitman “...frequently represents human figures watching recently dead bodies... bodies that have until very recently been alive and are consequently on a border-line between being alive and being dead in the eyes of the observer.”³² In other words, Moon points out that *Drum-Taps* sees Whitman foreground individual identity, and in particular, the moment it is threatened with annihilation in order that he might mine the supposed boundaries between life and death, one person and another. In *Drum-Taps*, Whitman learns the art of the vigil strange, without which there would be no *Ars moriendi* of his late poetry. The vigil strange is a

³⁰ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 210.

³¹ Qtd. on David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 324.

³² Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 176.

memorial mode which will explain Walt Whitman's late habit of providing dates and details in his poems. It is also an exercise in *in-betweenness* and demonstrates Whitman meditate on the boundary between the body and the soul. He begins to wonder if it is not a threshold. In his representative vigil strange, the poet croons:

Vigil strange I kept on the field one night...

Found you in death so cold, dear comrade—found your body, son of responding kisses,

(never again on earth responding;)

Bared your face in the starlight—curious the scene—cool blew the moderate night-wind;

Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around me the battle-field spreading;

Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet, there in the fragrant silent night...³³

Neither the speaker nor the fallen comrade is named in this poem so steeped in silence, but herein, Whitman the watcher begins to understand that silence is another way of speaking or bearing witness. And if that is true, he need not worry about the potential of specifics like names and dates associated with individual identities to eclipse those of others. Specifics can render silences clearer, and silences can speak.

This lesson is confirmed in "To the leaven'd Soil they trod," in which "The average earth, the witness of war and peace, *acknowledges mutely*."³⁴ In other words, while conducting so many vigils strange in the wards of the wounded, and by restaging these vigils in verse, Whitman begins to understand that any assertion of identity is an invitation. Exhaustiveness is not a prerequisite for representative poetry. Rather than deny space for another's particulars, the insertion of identity in a poem, of detail, invites and inspires the reader to claim for themselves what Sylvia Plath called the old brag and which is another name for the holiest of holies in the

³³ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 52.

³⁴ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 132, emphasis mine.

Christian Bible: I AM.³⁵ And so, Whitman increasingly includes names, dates, and other details in *Leaves of Grass*. Abraham Lincoln is famously unnamed in the original elegies that make up *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, but he is identified indeed when the poems are regrouped as *Memories of President Lincoln*. We begin to meet very particular poems like “1861” which look forward to late-style staples like “A Carol Closing Sixty-Nine” and “Abraham Lincoln, Born Feb. 12, 1809.” If *Drum-Taps* sees the beginning of Whitman’s late habit of dating, detailing, or otherwise annotating his poems, it also marks the start of his intense interest in what we might call imagism.

Justin Kaplan insists on the early imagism of Whitman’s 1853/1854 poem “Pictures.”³⁶ But what we might indeed call the poet’s imagism, or his faith in the poetic power of the foregrounded, crystal-clear image, is most thoroughly and transparently worked out on the threshing floor of *Drum-Taps*. And it is no wonder. Elaine Scarry reveals the relationship between pain and language in her seminal *The Body in Pain*:

Physical pain has no voice... whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language.

‘English,’ writes Virginia Woolf, ‘which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver or the headache... The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry.’ True of the headache, Woolf’s account is of course more radically true of the severe and prolonged pain that may accompany cancer or burns or phantom limb or stroke...

³⁵ Exod. 3:14 KJV; Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963, reprinted with a Foreword by Frances McCullough, P.S. Biographical Note by Lois Ames, and Drawings by Sylvia Plath, Harper Perennial, 2005), 243.

³⁶ Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (Simon and Schuster, 1980), 173.

Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.³⁷

In *Memoranda During the War*, Whitman recalls one of the first sights that met his eyes outside of the Virginia camp hospitals: “Out doors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front of the house, I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, & c., a full-load for a one-horse cart.”³⁸ Whitman experiences psychic pain in the presence of so much physical pain. This gruesome sight of such extreme suffering radically if momentarily de-centers Whitman and strips him of language. Primed to do so in a warzone steeped in pain—a site Scarry contends is inhospitable to language—Walt Whitman begins to consider how he might usurp the power of the image for and in poetry.

Ezra Pound introduces the main tenants of Imagism and “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” in the March 1913 issue of Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry*: “An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives the sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.”³⁹ Pound is describing the effect felt by Whitman standing before the heap of amputated limbs. Pound and Whitman encounter something close to but not quite the sublime. And although Whitman was of course not a card-carrying Imagist in the early twentieth century, there is extensive evidence that begs us to consider his imagism and whether

³⁷ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 3-4.

³⁸ Walt Whitman, *Memoranda During the War* (1875-1876, reprinted, edited by Peter Coviello, Oxford University Press, 2004), 8.

³⁹ Qtd. by William Pratt, Introduction to *The Imagist Poem: Modern Poetry in Miniature* (University of New Orleans Publishing, 1963), 32.

or not he was the first Imagist poet.⁴⁰ His interest, and skill, in imagism will peak in the late style on display in the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*'s two annexes, but it begins here in *Drum-Taps*. Whitman's imagism is a prime example of the fruitfulness of reperiodization efforts and the ways in which the poet's extended career, complex achievement, and varied affiliations are all obscured by his longstanding demarcation on the anterior side of 1865.

As early as 1846, Walt Whitman was interested in photography. That year, Whitman reflected on his visit to the daguerreotype studio of John Plumbe for *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Living through the American Civil War, witnessing its carnage for himself—Whitman came to the same urgent conclusion as Matthew Brady: these battlefield images have to be shared and brought to the home front. Brady opted to preserve such challenging images in photography, while Whitman chose poetry. Whitman intuited what Ezra Pound would put into words in *Poetry* magazine: in order for the image to garner its power, in order for it to so effectively de-center the reader and transport them to another time or place, it must seem instantaneous. For Whitman, and for Pound, clearly foregrounding and empowering the image in verse meant writing short poems. This experimentation helps explain the presence of such brief pieces in *Drum-Taps* as "Cavalry crossing a ford," "Mother and babe," and "A farm picture." The latter reads in full: "Through the ample open door of the peaceful country barn, / A sun-lit pasture field, with cattle and horses feeding."⁴¹ Rendered so simply, without ornamentation or excess detail, this idyllic image is a forceful if temporary restoration of peace in the bellicose cluster.⁴²

⁴⁰ See the following chapter for more on Whitman and Imagism.

⁴¹ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 59.

⁴² In *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of the Union*, Timothy Sweet considers Whitman's take on the pastoral to be a form of violent erasure. Sweet considers both Whitman and Brady's traffic in images to be strictly ideological. I find that Whitman's honesty and anxiety about what might prove unsaid and unsayable—to which I now pivot—complicates Sweet's argument.

Still, some images tested Whitman's faith in poetry as a fit vessel. "A march in the ranks hard-prest and the road unknown" could be Dante describing a special section of hell rather than Whitman remembering the war's wounded wards:

'Tis a large old church, at the crossing roads—'tis now an impromptu hospital;
 — 'Entering but for a minute, *I see a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made:*
 Shadows of deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps,
 And by one great pitchy torch, stationary, with wild red flame, and clouds of smoke...
 At my feet more distinctly, a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death, (he is
 shot in the abdomen;)

I staunch the blood temporarily, (the youngster's face is white as a lily...⁴³

At other moments in *Drum-Taps*, Whitman's worry about the insufficiency of language is even more palpable. In "Song of the Banner at Day-Break," he cries: "Words! book-words! what are you? / Words no more, for hearken and see, / My song is there in the open air— and I must sing, / With the banner and pennant a-flapping."⁴⁴ Still, he recognizes the incantatory power of the image before him, proclaiming: "I hear and see not strips of cloth alone; / I hear the tramp of armies, I hear the challenging sentry; / I hear the jubilant shouts of millions of men—I hear LIBERTY!"⁴⁵ Pound calls this phenomenon instantaneousness, and Kurt Vonnegut might call it becoming *unstuck in time*—but all agree that this capability of literature to de-center a self and transport that self into and among other experiences is a special transformative power.

⁴³ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 55, emphasis mine. Lawrence Kramer points out that Whitman's echo of Dante was likely intentional. The poet was reading and referencing both Dante and Virgil as he tried to make sense of his experiences in the hospital wards.

⁴⁴ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 9.

⁴⁵ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 12.

“By the bivouac’s fitful flame” is another ancestor of later incantatory séance-poems like “The Pallid Wreath” or “Apparitions” of *Good-Bye My Fancy*. By the light of a foregrounded flame, Whitman summons and studies: “A procession winding around me, solemn and sweet and slow... / Of life and death— of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away; / A solemn and slow procession there as I sit on the ground, / By the bivouac’s fitful flame.”⁴⁶

Subtly, through the Miltonic alliteration of ‘s’ in this poem, Whitman also foregrounds the image of a snake—a leitmotif he reuses throughout *Drum-Taps* usually when describing the serpentine movement of soldiers in a line. Whitman is very clearly considering the power of an image preserved in both individual and sequences of poems in *Drum-Taps*.

WALT WHITMAN AND THE MEDICAL HUMANITIES

Despite his nascent understanding of the near magical power of imagist poetry, Whitman’s worries about what might prove unsaid or unsayable continue to pop up in *Drum-Taps*. He hurriedly crams darker elements into his verse, crying: “Demons and death then I sing; / Put in all, aye all,” and we will see this coping mechanism persist and develop into late-style poems like “Divine Catalogue Rounded Complete.”⁴⁷ However, that poem will satisfy the bard so that he does not have to offer empty boasts in *Good-Bye My Fancy* like his supposed defeat of all degradations in “Ah poverties, wincings, and sulky retreats” of *Drum-Taps*.⁴⁸ As we will see, the late poem’s success depends on Whitman’s lessons in photography. “Divine Catalogue Rounded Complete” is a kind of negative image.

In the titular poem of *Drum-Taps*, Whitman likewise factors in darker elements, referencing the “the red business” of war.⁴⁹ Perhaps in doing so, the poet is nodding to Lord Tennyson’s

⁴⁶ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 17.

⁴⁷ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 14.

⁴⁸ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 122.

⁴⁹ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 5.

iconic assessment of nature as “red in tooth and claw.”⁵⁰ In his late-style poetry and prose, Whitman considers aristocratic or Old-World figures like Tennyson to be entirely relevant to his dear democracy.⁵¹ Vitally, it is in *Drum-Taps* that Whitman begins to conceptualize the United States as a transnational, even global, phenomenon in earnest. Whitman first presents this idea of the United States in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* that was subsequently removed from the volume: “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem... Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations.”⁵² During the war years, Walt Whitman transformed the instability and even impermanence of America’s borders from stark problems into utopian possibilities in his poetry.

If the United States is indeed “Out of reach—an idea only—yet furiously fought for,” it is clearly a global concern in *Drum-Taps*.⁵³ In “The Centenarian’s Story,” Whitman considers his country’s English roots, but also its connections to more ancient civilizations—and so we see special Homeric touches in the piece (a blind seer, phantom brigades, a heroic general). Whitman even adds French flare, substituting *chansonnier* for his more common *bard*. And in poems like “A Broadway Pageant” and “Old Ireland,” Whitman imaginatively sojourns in Japan and Ireland in a book of poetry supposedly about the American Civil War. Whitman’s cosmopolitanism begins in *Drum-Taps* and shines brightest in late masterworks like *Good-Bye My Fancy*.

⁵⁰ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Selected Poetry* (edited and with an Introduction by Douglas Bush, The Modern Library, 1951), 182.

⁵¹ Their full embrace depends on Whitman’s developing cosmopolitanism, but as his boyhood habit of singing Shakespeare on the beaches of Coney Island and his later essays on both Shakespeare and Tennyson suggest, Whitman’s was a lifelong admiration for the pair of English authors.

⁵² Walt Whitman, 1855 *Leaves of Grass* (1855, reprinted in *The Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, edited by Justin Kaplan, 2-145. The Library of America, 1982, represented as “1855 LoG” in subsequent footnotes), 5.

⁵³ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 16.

While I am interested in Whitman’s slowly but steadily widening definition of America as such, the notion of a distinctly Global Whitman is a multifaceted and rich frontier of inquiry. Thoren Optiz, for example, has recently offered insight into how the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* was designed with a global market in mind.

In the preface to *Good-Bye My Fancy*, Whitman describes his aging body “much like some hard-cased dilapidated grim ancient shell-fish or time-bang’d conch (no legs, utterly non-locomotive).”⁵⁴ This is clearly not the robust frame from *Song of Myself* with “the scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer.”⁵⁵ It is a new body, a much less healthy one, on display in Walt Whitman’s late poetry. Christopher Hager and Cody Marrs refer to “...the *Ars moriendi* of [Whitman’s] final clusters, in which he continuously places his decaying body on public display.”⁵⁶ Mario Corona’s research dives into this new figuration of the body in Whitman’s late poetry, and I find the origins of this “renewed poetry of the body” in *Drum-Taps*.⁵⁷ And of course the American Civil War forced the poet to reconsider the sanctity of the human body. James McPherson clarifies the special tragedy here: “The Civil War was fought at the end of the medical Middle Ages... The medical revolution came too late to benefit [civil war surgeons]. They were not aware of the exact relationship between water and typhoid, between unsterilized instruments and infection, between mosquitoes and malaria. The concept of asepsis and antisepsis in surgery had not been developed... Surgeons knew of few ways except amputation to stop gangrene or osteomyelitis or pyemia.”⁵⁸

In poems like “The Dresser,” Whitman reckons with the medical trauma of the war. And in such poems, he relies on an old technique: syncope. Syncope is the poetic practice of shortening a word by omission. But as Joan Didion so poignantly reminds us in her memoir *Blue Nights*—it is also a diagnostic term.⁵⁹ Medically, syncope can refer to missing moments in a person’s

⁵⁴ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 638.

⁵⁵ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 211.

⁵⁶ Christopher Hager and Cody Marrs, “Against 1865: Reperiodizing the Nineteenth Century” (*J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1, no. 2 (2013): 259-284, doi:10.1353/jnc.2013.0026), 270.

⁵⁷ Qtd. by Caterina Bernardini and Kenneth M. Price, “Whitman’s ‘Deathbed’ Radicalism and its Modernist Effects” (in *The New Walt Whitman Studies*, ed. Matt Cohen. Cambridge University Press, 2020), 30.

⁵⁸ McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 486.

⁵⁹ Joan Didion, *Blue Nights* (Vintage International, 2012), 142.

recollection following an accident or fall. Syncope reminds us, as Didion and Whitman surely knew, that a poem is a body, and the body is a poem. The war taught Whitman that sometimes corporeal amputation is a violent necessity, and he began to apply this lesson to his body of work. We know that *Drum-Taps* appeared in 1865 as a stand-alone volume. Thereafter, Whitman appended the cluster to the back of *Leaves of Grass* before finally integrating it into the larger work.⁶⁰ What are these but surgical operations upon *Leaves of Grass*? Scholars disagree about the necessity of the *Drum-Taps* procedures. For example, Lawrence Kramer argues that Whitman diminished the work with every edit after 1865, whereas I find the version of *Drum-Taps* that appears in the Deathbed edition of Whitman's *magnum opus* to be the most satisfying and thematically unified. In "The Disorder of *Drum-Taps*," Ted Genoways compellingly argues that the 1865 arrangement of *Drum-Taps* was "imposed, rather than intentional" and had everything to do with scarcity and the price of paper in April of 1865.⁶¹ Regardless, it is the fact of Whitman's poetic procedures originating in the war years that will help us approach and understand Whitman's late style.

For Whitman also published *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy* outside of *Leaves of Grass* before coronating the Deathbed edition thereof with the twilight clusters as appendices. These clusters are the direct descendants of *Drum-Taps*. Whitman references these three collections with similar, and deceptively diminutive epithets. According to Whitman, *Drum-Taps* is a collection of "these little songs," or, "No poem proud... / But a little book, containing night's darkness, and blood-dripping wounds / And psalms of the dead."⁶² And the poems of *Good-Bye My Fancy* in particular are "little tags and fringe-dots (maybe specks, stains,)," "last droplets,"

⁶⁰ See the 1867 and 1871-1872 editions of *Leaves of Grass*, respectively.

⁶¹ Ted Genoways, "The Disorder of *Drum-Taps*" (*Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 24, no. 2 (2006): 98-117, <http://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr/vol24/iss2/5>), 115.

⁶² Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 119, 130.

and “certain chirps.”⁶³ Of course, as I will address in the following chapter, Whitman diminishes these poems with a wink—he was, as he should have been, quite proud of them. The only thing little about the *Drum-Taps* or the twilight poems are their size on the page; for the most part, these are all very short poems.

Partly, this is because of Whitman’s advancing age. The poet suffered a series of strokes after 1873 that left him in states of partial paralysis for the rest of his life. Writing something like *Song of Myself* became increasingly difficult, just physically speaking. But importantly, Whitman began to pen short poems in and after the war in order to harness the instantaneous power of the image, long before he experienced his first stroke. Too, he became more keenly interested in his poems as pieces, vital parts of the larger body of *Leaves of Grass*. When necessary, he performed surgery on his poetry—rearranging and integrating clusters, but also increasingly placing poems in periodicals before they appeared in *Leaves of Grass*.⁶⁴ *Leaves of Grass* is the body, made whole in its Deathbed edition. *Leaves of Grass*, not *Drum-Taps* alone, is Whitman’s “book separate, not link’d with the rest, nor felt by the intellect.”⁶⁵ In the preface to *Good-Bye My Fancy*, Whitman testifies to this truth when he claims: “Those times of which, O far-off reader, this whole book is indeed finally but a reminiscent memorial from thence by me to you?”⁶⁶

Whitman’s habit of shuffling clusters from individual identities to parts of *Leaves of Grass*—or the persistence of his revisions— is a key manifestation of what Robert Leigh Davis identifies

⁶³ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 637.

⁶⁴ Ted Genoways’s argument reveals another dimension to this corporeal metaphor. Concluding that the original order of *Drum-Taps* was a purely financial consequence, he does not negate subsequent, meaningful interpretations of the sequence: “I would argue nevertheless that it is the ultimate, poignant *reflection* of the war, embodying in its very arrangements the wounds and scars of April 1865” (116). The war years made a medical man of Walt Whitman.

⁶⁵ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 7.

⁶⁶ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 638.

as the poet's *oscillation*. Evaluating *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine*, Davis explains Whitman's openness to poetic operations:

This is the space of Whitman's romance, the moonlit space of blurred and intermingled boundaries Hawthorne calls 'a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.' Like Hawthorne's 'neutral territory' or Poe's 'border-ground,' the 'medium world' of Whitman's hospital *oscillates* between fixed states— 'between our well-known practiced one' and 'one there may-be somewhere on beyond' — and Whitman construes that oscillation as a positive value, the shared, unstable ground of poetry, democracy, and convalescence.⁶⁷

What Davis calls Whitman's essential oscillation might also be called his version of Hegelianism or Keats's Negative Capability. I have written about this habit of Whitman's as a philosophical devotion to the *via media* in life and letters. But no matter what it is called, this habit, present from the beginning ("Do I contradict myself? Very well then... I contradict myself; / I am large... I contain multitudes."), is fortified in the war years and wounded wards.⁶⁸

In-betweenness is all over *Drum-Taps*. In "A sight in camp in the day-break grey and dim," the poet pivots to the third of three fallen forms and notes that the face before him is "nor child, nor old" but something else entirely, something in-between.⁶⁹ "Give me the splendid silent sun" is patently Hegelian. Lawrence Kramer points out that "Hymn of dead soldiers" is a palinode of "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," "O Tan-Faced Prairie Boy," and "Beat! Beat! Drums!" And this phenomenon—Whitman's operative oscillation— will form the foundation of a faith fleshed out

⁶⁷ Davis, *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine*, 2-3, emphasis mine.

⁶⁸ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 87.

⁶⁹ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 58.

in the twilight clusters. Simply, in the war years, in the face of such carnage and corporeal suffering, Whitman begins to wonder whether or not he was wrong when he claimed: “I have said that the soul is not more than the body, / And I have said that the body is not more than the soul.”⁷⁰ In *Drum-Taps*, Whitman begins to suspect the supremacy of the soul.

The trio of symbols in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” is rightly celebrated, but I am much more interested in a curious trinity from the eighteenth section of “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” There, the poet wanders: “I too with my soul and body, / We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way, / Through these shores, amid the shadows, with the apparitions pressing,”⁷¹ And he wonders: is the self something separate from the body and the soul? Is there a third thing? The war causes Whitman to take seriously the question of whether or not consciousness might survive bodily death. In other words, in the war years, Whitman ponders the meaning of death for identity.

Whitman witnessed many deaths in the army hospitals. The death of Erastus Haskell especially affected him. In a letter to the soldier’s parents, Whitman addresses the deceased directly:

Poor dear son, though you were not my son, I felt to love you as a son, what short time I saw you sick & dying here—*it is as well as it is, perhaps better—for who knows whether he is not better off, that patient & sweet young soul, to go, than we are to stay?* So farewell, dear boy—it was my opportunity to be with you in your last rapid days of death—no chance as I have said to do any thing particular, for nothing [could be done—

⁷⁰ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 84.

⁷¹ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 32.

only you did not lay] here & die among strangers without having one at hand who loved you dearly, & to whom you gave your dying kiss.⁷²

What are these epistolary lines but the seeds of the title poem of *Good-Bye My Fancy*—the one which finally concludes *Leaves of Grass*? There, Whitman espouses a soothing if uncertain and unspecific faith, his own “hope not hopeless, but unhopeful.”⁷³ Saying goodbye, and hello, to his audience, Whitman muses: “Then if we die we die together, (yes, we’ll remain one,) / If we go anywhere we’ll go together to see what happens, / *May-be we’ll be better off and blither*, and learn something.”⁷⁴ Whitman sings this twilight trust of his in “Going Somewhere” of *Sands at Seventy*, too:

‘The sum, concluding all we know of old or modern learning, intuitions deep...
Is that we all are onward, onward, speeding slowly, surely bettering,
Life, life an endless march, an endless army, (no halt, but it is duly over,)
The world, the race, the soul — in space and time the universes,
All bound as is befitting each — all surely going somewhere.’⁷⁵

Whitman’s twilight philosophy is rooted in his wartime epistles and in the poems of *Drum-Taps*, in particular the epitaphic lyric “As toilsome I wander’d Virginia’s woods.”

Scholars like Peter Coviello are right to conclude that the war warped Whitman’s understanding of and poetic portrayal of the body, and that he managed to salvage therefrom a faith in the adhesive power of sex. But sex is not the only physical phenomenon that Whitman took more seriously after the war. The war granted him a new perspective on, and respect for,

⁷² Qtd. by Morris, *The Better Angel*, 130, emphasis mine.

⁷³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903, reprinted with “The Talented Tenth” and “The Souls of White Folk,” an introduction by Ibram X. Kendi, and notes by Monica M. Elbert, Penguin Books, 2021), 3.

⁷⁴ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 654, emphasis mine.

⁷⁵ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 627.

sex *and* death. In “How solemn, as one by one,” the poet exudes: “O the bullet could never kill what you really are, dear friend.”⁷⁶ And so, we see Whitman suspect that death might prove a transformative experience necessary for the ultimate triumph of the soul. These *Drum-Taps* roots of Walt Whitman’s late style are important to study, as they help explain and enrich our understanding of all of the military accoutrements scattered across the late verse. We see life defined in military terms in “Going Somewhere,” and in other late poems, like “My 71st Year,” we will see Whitman develop his fundamental identification as a soldier that he first grasps in “As I lay with my head in your lap, Camerado.”

The late style’s descendance from *Drum-Taps* is most important to recognize as *Drum-Taps* introduces deathcare—or the empathetic arrangement of affairs for the newly or soon-to-be deceased and their loved ones, an underappreciated form of healthcare—into the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman’s *Ars moriendi*. The previous chapter of my dissertation studied an American people who were quite familiar with, indeed very good at mourning and deathcare. But, as Drew Gilpin Faust and her *This Republic of Suffering* attest, the American Civil War presented death, and a need for deathcare, on a previously unfathomable scale. It initiated a cultural crisis in death and dying that I argue we have not yet recovered from in the twenty-first century. Walt Whitman’s raw experiments in deathcare, his collection of vigils strange in *Drum-Taps* are a vital lesson for contemporary Americans. Richard Gunderman, a physician and professor of medical humanities, confirms the relevance of Whitman’s wartime writings to modern patients and physicians:

For this America’s greatest poet, life’s deepest lessons were to be found at the bedside, a lesson that should not be lost on today’s physicians... Unlike the doctors and nurses,

⁷⁶ Whitman, *Drum-Taps*, 129.

Whitman was in no hurry. He could listen to the soldiers. He could read to them. In some cases, he could even hold their hands... Whitman's greatest resource was one which is available to contemporary health professionals in equal measure, compassion, but from which it is easy to be distracted by the technical wizardry of 21st century medicine.

Dr. Gunderman dubs Whitman a "midwife to the words" in those war hospitals.⁷⁷ *Drum-Taps* was a midwife to the poet's own late style, and both Walt Whitman's wartime writings and his twilight clusters ought to be made cornerstones in medical humanities curriculum as together, in the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, they form an American *Ars moriendi*.

⁷⁷ Richard B. Gunderman, "Lessons at the Bedside: Walt Whitman" (*The Pharos* (Summer 2023): 26-30, <https://www.alphaomegaalpha.org/3d-flip-book/summer-2023/>), 27-29.

CHAPTER THREE: “AFTER THE COUNTLESS SONGS”: WALT WHITMAN’S

LATE STYLE¹

*How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
 To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use...
 Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
 Death closes all: but something ere the end,
 Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
 Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods...
 'T is not too late to seek a newer world.
 Push off, and sitting well in order smite
 The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
 To sail beyond the sunset...
 It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
 It may be that we shall touch the Happy Isles...
 Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
 We are not now that strength which in old days
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.
 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Ulysses”²*

INTRODUCTION TO WALT WHITMAN’S LATE STYLE: *OUT OF THE CRADLE TO THE GRAVE*

Delivering the Nobel Lecture in Literature in 1993, Toni Morrison made a proposal about death: “Word work is sublime, [the griot] thinks, because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference—the way in which we are like no other life. We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we *do* language. That may be the measure of our

¹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 653.

² Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Selected Poetry* (edited and with an Introduction by Douglas Bush, The Modern Library, 1951), 88-90.

lives.”³ Walt Whitman likewise recognized the centrality of death to the meaning and purpose of human existence, and he spent his life preparing for, indeed participating in, his death with the language of *Leaves of Grass*.

The poet has a pantheon of biographers, and each has illumined a vital facet of Walt Whitman’s life and legacy. In the previous chapter, I relied on Roy Morris’s portrait of Whitman in the American Civil War, *The Better Angel*. But of them all, Justin Kaplan’s biography of Walt Whitman reigns supreme, in large part because it astutely begins with his end and thereby captures the poet’s lifelong preoccupation with his own death. The first chapter of *Walt Whitman, A Life* is entitled “Mickle Street” after the home Whitman purchased in Camden, New Jersey in 1884 and inhabited until his death a few years later. The second section of Kaplan’s biography is called “Burial House.” The biographer and longtime editor of Whitman’s work is right to emphasize Whitman’s end. From his bardic beginnings in 1855, Walt Whitman was focused on death. He croons in the poem later called *Song of Myself*: “And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier. / Has any one supposed it lucky to be born? I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it. / I pass death with the dying, and birth with the new-washed babe.... and am not contained between my hat and boots.”⁴

Curious from the outset, the poet began to approach death, his own in particular, as a craft in the 1859 masterwork *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* (a poem originally titled *A Word Out of the Sea*). Addressing a bird symbolic of the bard himself, therein Whitman cries:

O you singer solitary...

Never more shall I escape...

³ Toni Morrison, “The Nobel Lecture in Literature” (in *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, Meditations*, Vintage, Penguin Random House UK, 2019), 106.

⁴ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 32.

The messenger there arous'd the fire, the sweet hell within,
 The unknown want, the destiny of me.
 O give me the clew! (it lurks in the night here somewhere,)

O if I am to have so much, let me have more!
 A word then, (for I will conquer it,)

The word final, superior to all, / Subtle, sent up—what is it?—I listen;
 Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you sea-waves...

Whereto answering, the sea,
 Delaying not, hurrying not,
 Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,
 Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,
 And again death, death, death, death,
 Hissing melodious...

But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
 Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
 Death, death, death, death, death.⁵

I quote this poem at length, because the concluding refrain subsequently sustained the lengthening *Leaves of Grass*. The bereaved bird's refrain became the heartbeat of Walt Whitman's *magnum opus*. *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* recollects the revelation of Walt Whitman. Thereafter, the poet considered and cultivated *Leaves of Grass* as a guidebook for fellow Americans, those "of all nations," seeking to coronate a meaningful life with a good

⁵ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 393.

death.⁶ Whitman determined: *Leaves of Grass* would grow unto his death and be a nonsectarian, American *Ars moriendi*.

Conversing with Horace Traubel in that house on Mickle Street in June of 1888, Whitman reflected on this sanctity of *Leaves of Grass*:

People often speak of the *Leaves* as wanting in religion, but that is not my view of the book—and I ought to know. I think the *Leaves* the most religious book among books: crammed full of faith. What would the *Leaves* be without faith? An empty vessel: faith is its very substance, balance—its one article of assent—its one item of assurance.⁷

Walt Whitman was sure. His text would be sacred and his poetic purpose specific. He would be a guide and his *Leaves* a guidebook to the art of dying well. A special achievement of another of Whitman's biographers, David Reynolds, is to have elucidated the extent to which Walt Whitman was philosophically rooted in and devoted to the *via media*. The poet claimed this position on the *via media* early on in *Song of Myself*: "Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am... / Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it."⁸ In *Walt Whitman's America*, his cultural biography of the poet, Reynolds demonstrates the uniqueness of this position, as Whitman lived in a violently partisan period. Devoted to an America that was both fierce and fractious, Walt Whitman sympathized with both reformers as well as the unredeemed they sought to reform (prostitutes, alcoholics, gamblers, etc.), with both the slaveholding South and the formerly enslaved person, with the Confederate and the Union soldiers. Whitman determined early on that he would stand on the *via media* in life and letters.

⁶ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 5.

⁷ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (vol. I, Small, Maynard & Company, 1906), 372.

⁸ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 30.

But it was after *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* and its placement in *Leaves of Grass* that Walt Whitman recognized that mortality is an essentially liminal experience. Whitman understood that human life on earth is but a sojourn, and he resolved that if mortality must be liminal, it might not be lonely for those who follow him.

By putting it all—his life and his death—in his beloved book, Walt Whitman would be a witness. Standing somewhere in-between life and death in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman could provide hope for those who agonize in suspecting—as Leo Tolstoy famously did—that mortality might annihilate any meaning of human existence and experience. In *Out of the Cradle*, Whitman famously relates his youthful stirrings and call to a priesthood of poetry. But it is here too, in his willingness to hear and record the awful refrain “Death, death, death, death, death,” that Whitman determines to put it all in the book—his youth, but also, vitally, his aging, his suffering, and his end.⁹ Summarizing the mission, Horace Traubel submitted to Whitman: “Walt, my idea of your idea is this—that you are to write on and write on to the end, even in senility, so as to make the *Leaves* a complete record of a life. Is that it?” Whitman confirmed:

That’s it: that is all and final: there’s no more to be said: I don’t say a man’s old age is as important as his youth or less important than his youth: or his work—that it’s as strong: that does not come in: I only say that in the larger view, in the scheme originally laid down for the *Leaves*, the last old age even if an old age of the dotard is as essential (if I live to old age) as the record of my first youth.¹⁰

After *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, Whitman increasingly turned to the singing bird as his symbol for the *bona fide* bard, or, for himself. Such an animal is no stranger to students of English Romanticism. Many nineteenth-century British poets, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge,

⁹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 393.

¹⁰ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. III (Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 356.

John Keats, and Percy Shelley, relied on birds to represent poets in their poetry. But Whitman's bird is unique. Solitary singers, his bird and his bard are marked beings. Having been tragically initiated into the rites and rituals of deathcare through direct and early experience, they form a grim priesthood whose mission is to bear witness to others about the end that awaits all mortals.¹¹ Whitman's "singer solitary" is a through line in *Leaves of Grass*. The bird debuts in *Out of the Cradle*, flits through *Drum-Taps* and *Memories of President Lincoln* in elegiac poems like "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and finally lands in Whitman's twilight poetry—in the appendices *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy* which complete the Deathbed edition and *Ars moriendi* of *Leaves of Grass*.

In a footnote to a poem from *Good-Bye My Fancy* called "An Ended Day," one longer than the poem to which it is attached, Whitman meditates:

In my rambles and explorations I found a woody place near the creek, where for some reason the birds in happy mood seem'd to resort in unusual numbers. Especially at the beginning of the day, and again at the ending, I was sure to get the most copious bird-concerts. I repair'd there frequently at sunrise—and also at sunset, or just before... Once the question arose in me: Which is the best singing, the first or the lattermost? The first always exhilarated, and perhaps seem'd more joyous and stronger; but I always felt the sunset or late afternoon sounds more penetrating and sweeter—seem'd to touch the soul—often the evening thrushes, two or three of them, responding and perhaps blending. Though I miss'd some of

¹¹ The bird in *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* is initiated by his experience of being widowed; Whitman, by his experiences during the American Civil War touched upon in the previous chapter.

the mornings, I found myself getting to be quite strictly punctual at the evening utterances.¹²

By foregrounding the symbolic thrush, so long associated with his own songs and poetic purpose, Whitman grants us insight into his consciousness and craftsmanship of a late style. Like the sunrise singers, Walt Whitman famously offered robust and exuberant songs in his early career. In sprawling masterpieces like *Song of Myself*, he boasts about his divinely scented armpits and demands: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then... I contradict myself; / I am large... I contain multitudes... / I too am not a bit tamed... I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.”¹³ And in his later years, Whitman sang his own twilight songs.

These poems, the ones which make up the appendices *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*, are much shorter poems than the early ones like *Song of Myself* or *Out of the Cradle*. They are quieter, eschewing certainty for curiosity. These poems include plenty of annotations and such ruminative footnotes. And they are more interested in the spirit than in the body. The “yawps” of his early career, exhilarating indeed, have so often crowded the later verse out of the critical conversation on Walt Whitman. But as he suggests in his metacommentary on birdsong in this footnote to “An Ended Day”—the early poems might be more joyous and stronger, but the late ones are more penetrating and sweeter. Walt Whitman yawps, but he also chirps. The poet’s late style is a cocoon that coheres his twilight songs and completes his guide to dying well. A greater understanding of and familiarity with this late style might seriously aid an America in need of its *Ars moriendi*.

¹² Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 641.

¹³ Whitman, 1855 *LoG*, 5.

The following chapter offers an overview of Walt Whitman's distinct late style. Closely reading the poems of the appendices to the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, I not only define Walt Whitman's late style but begin to demonstrate how these poems function as an *Ars moriendi* (work I complete in the following chapter). I conclude the chapter by returning to reperiodization. The body of this dissertation is directed toward those two categories of persons precious to the medical humanities: patients and providers. However, my study of late Whitman also has much to offer fellow literary critics. I emphasize my contribution to literary studies by revealing how—in addition to forming an *Ars moriendi*—the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* belongs to both the bodies of Modernist poetry and great American autobiography. My work here extends that of Cody Marrs and Christopher Hager in *Timelines of American Literature*. I echo their invitation to imagine alternative organizations of American literature—dubbing Whitman, for one example, a co-founder of Imagist poetry.

There is an additional aesthetic component to my argument. Simply, I contend that Walt Whitman's twilight poems—the ones from *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*—rival the achievement of his early staples like *Song of Myself*. I am especially indebted to Anton Vander Zee in the development of my multifaceted project on late Whitman. In a quartet of articles on Whitman's late poetry and period, Zee carefully unpacks the myth of late Whitman—also known as “The Good Gray Poet.”¹⁴ A master self-promoter since 1855, Walt Whitman participated in the creation of this myth which made a martyr of him in old age and a mystery of his late poems. It is no small task to dig beneath this mythology. I extend Zee's work by diving deeper into the appendices and by introducing the *Ars moriendi* as the lens with which we might

¹⁴ The larger late Whitman myth originated in William D. O'Connor's postwar portrait of “The Good Gray Poet.” For a complete history of this archetype and its afterlives, see chapter fourteen of David S. Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America*.

better understand the relationship between art and aging processes—a critical need identified by Zee. Before I dive into *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*, I offer a survey of the field Zee so healthfully changed. Namely, I sketch the reception history of the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

THE RECEPTION HISTORY OF THE DEATHBED EDITION OF LEAVES OF GRASS

Walt Whitman debuted *Sands at Seventy* in *November Boughs* in 1888 and *Good-Bye My Fancy* as a slim, stand-alone volume in 1891 before making them appendices to *Leaves of Grass*. Since its debut at the fin de siècle, many literary critics have avoided Walt Whitman's twilight poetry and thus the poet's late style. In his own final book of verse *On Earth*, Robert Creeley summarizes the prevailing position on Whitman's late poetry, one to which he is opposed: "The common sense is that Whitman's poems faded as he grew older. That their art grew more mechanical and that the poems themselves had rarely the power of his more youthful writing."¹⁵ This opinion is held by a diverse pantheon of thinkers, and it is sometimes rather curtly expressed. Harold Bloom declares: "With only occasional exceptions, [Whitman]'s great poetry ends in 1865."¹⁶

Critics have tended to similarly dismiss or neglect Whitman's late verse and late style for a variety of complex reasons. First, we who admire Whitman's words so often take comfort in his early exuberance and easy faith in immortality. The late work makes us tremendously uncomfortable. There, we see the poet who once boldly claimed that he knew himself to be deathless admit he is dying.¹⁷ We also tend to neglect the late work, as the uncommon extension, depth, and breadth of Whitman's career complicates our ideas about the periodization of

¹⁵ Robert Creeley, *On Earth: Last Poems and An Essay* (University of California Press, 2006), 41.

¹⁶ Harold Bloom, *Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles: The Power of the Reader's Mind Over a Universe of Death* (Yale University Press, 2020), 388-389.

¹⁷ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 206.

American literature. In addition, Whitman scholars often avoid the late poetry as it is associated with Whitman's late politics. Aging in the wake of the Civil War, Whitman espoused increasingly offensive and racist views in private correspondence. That strand of his thought is left out of *Leaves of Grass*, including the first and second annexes, but the fact of the ethos's existence in the author's mind often prevents our serious engagement with his late work. Critical disengagement with the appendices, the only new material added to the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, has also doomed the 1891-1892 edition of *Leaves of Grass* to significant disregard.

Although it was preciously prized as a sort of lyrical last will and testament in the decades immediately following the poet's passing, Walt Whitman's Deathbed edition, or the 1891-1892 edition of *Leaves of Grass* has recently been demoted and is no longer the dominant edition in Whitman studies. Critical trends of the latter half of the twentieth century staged a coup, largely successful, on behalf of the first three editions of Walt Whitman's *magnum opus*. These critical trends are characteristically complex, but I might summarize the Deathbed edition's reversal of fortune by explaining that many twentieth-century literary critics, leaning into the professionalization of the field, distanced themselves from Walt Whitman's notorious Camden coterie of devotees by estranging themselves from the Deathbed edition of *Leaves*.¹⁸

Walt Whitman was surrounded in his old age by vocal supporters, near fanatics, who tirelessly campaigned for the establishment of Whitman's stardom (we might even say his martyrdom). These acolytes fundraised, published biographies and supportive pamphlets—some of them even went so far as to establish a Whitmanian church. Understandably desirous of being

¹⁸ Too, the 1855 edition best fits F.O. Matthiessen's "American Renaissance" story of unprecedented American literary output and originality, while the 1860 edition does the opposite and shows Whitman posing as a Fireside Poet. In other words, these early editions of *Leaves* are pedagogically quite helpful; they capture Whitman in context(s).

taken seriously as researchers capable of objectivity, many twentieth-century critics recognized potential association with this Camden camp as a liability. And so, these scholars distanced themselves from the poetic products of Whitman's old age and began to deprioritize if not dismiss the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

Critics like Anton Vander Zee and Christopher Hanlon, with his *Emerson's Memory Loss*, are returning to this watershed moment and recalibrating our literary critical response to art borne of old age. In the inaugural essay of *The New Walt Whitman Studies*, "Whitman's 'Deathbed' Radicalism and its Modernist Effects," Caterina Bernardini and Kenneth M. Price aim to join the ranks and likewise express esteem for the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*.¹⁹ However, following the lead of scholars like David Reynolds, R.W. French, and Amanda Gailey, Bernardini and Price use quotation marks to signal the supposed twin inaccuracies latent in the phrase "Deathbed edition." Because the edition was printed from the same plates as the 1881-1882 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and because the only new material added a decade later were the two annexes *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*, many Whitman scholars do not consider the Deathbed edition a proper edition of Whitman's great work.

I do not use quotation marks around the phrase Deathbed edition in my work, as my understanding of the richness of Walt Whitman's late style and the fact of the appendices achieving an *Ars moriendi* of *Leaves of Grass* lead me to concur with Whitman himself. Not only is the Deathbed edition of *Leaves* a proper edition, but it is the preferred edition and deserves pride of place in Whitman studies. The poet authorized the Deathbed edition upon its issue in an advertisement for the *New York Herald*:

Walt Whitman wishes respectfully to notify the public that the book *Leaves of Grass*,

¹⁹ Caterina Bernardini and Kenneth M. Price, "Whitman's 'Deathbed' Radicalism and its Modernist Effects" (in *The New Walt Whitman Studies*, edited by Matt Cohen, Cambridge University Press, 2020).

which he has been working on at great intervals and partially issued for the past thirty-five or forty years, is now completed, so to call it, and he would like this new 1892 edition to absolutely supersede all previous ones. Faulty as it is, he decides it as by far his special and entire self-chosen poetic utterance.²⁰

Throughout the twentieth century, literary and cultural critics largely ignored Whitman's notice. The tide began to turn in the twenty-first century. Most notably, Harold Aspiz published *So Long! Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death* in 2004 and Anton Vander Zee released his four major articles from 2010-2018. I follow their lead but uniquely offer a close reading of the appendices *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*—the clusters which complete *Leaves of Grass* and most clearly display Walt Whitman's late style.

WALT WHITMAN'S LATE STYLE

To the first of two title poems included in that final cluster of verse *Good-Bye My Fancy*, Walt Whitman appends another, brief but provocative footnote—a meditation in the margins.²¹ Whitman wonders what works like this—an author's last works—mean:

Why do folks dwell so fondly on the last words, advice, appearance, of the departing? Those last words are not samples of the best... But they are valuable beyond measure to confirm and endorse the varied train, facts, theories and faith of the whole preceding life.²²

The poet identifies the value of final productions in their alleged ability to summarize or conclude a robust career. And so, he presents his own last works, the first and second appendices

²⁰ Qtd. by Justin Kaplan in *Walt Whitman: A Life* (Simon and Schuster, 1980), 51.

²¹ *Leaves of Grass*, and the appendices in particular, are indeed *crammed full of faith*.

²² Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 639.

to the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass, Sands at Seventy* (1888) and *Good-Bye My Fancy* (1891), as crowns atop the body of his early poetry.

But the fact that this meditation on final productions comes in an unprecedented footnote—one longer than the poem to which it is attached—suggests that when it comes to Whitman's late work, the story is far more complicated than mere conclusion or coronation. In other words, Walt Whitman is misleading us. He similarly circumvents us when he deprecates his late poems. In the footnote to the first "Good-Bye My Fancy," Whitman suggests that his twilight poems are not "samples of the best." And in the prefatory note to the cluster *Good-Bye My Fancy*, the author refers to his late poems with diminishing epithets. He wonders aloud:

Had I not better withhold...such little tags and fringe-dots (maybe specks, stains,) as follow a long dusty journey... In answer, or rather defiance, to that kind of well-put interrogation, here comes this little cluster, and conclusion of my preceding clusters... this small old age collation... certain chirps.²³

But Whitman reveals the trick while promoting the final cluster in *Lippincott's Magazine* in August of 1891. There, the poet espouses a special, sturdy pride in *Good-Bye My Fancy* when he assesses the cluster:

The clef is here changed to its lowest, and the little book is a lot of tremolos about old age, death, and faith... The book is garrulous, irascible (like old Lear) and has various breaks and even tricks to avoid monotony. It will have to be ciphered and ciphered out long- and is probably in some respects the most curious part of its author's baffling works.

²³ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 637.

The poet confirms that there is something aberrant about the late poetry. No simple conclusion to the preceding career, the twilight work is “most curious” and ought to be “ciphered out long.”²⁴

Whitman playfully deceives us in the strange, little footnote to “Good-Bye My Fancy,” but he does testify to one truth with the quiet intensity of his meditation there: the poetry of Whitman’s appendices is inestimably rich. Whitman tells us as much when he prescribes our ciphering, and he shows us as much when he demonstrates the poetry’s belonging to the body of *Leaves of Grass* by employing his reliable methodology of alternately embracing and spurning his readers. We have witnessed Whitman’s oscillation between reticence and exuberance in masterworks like *Song of Myself* and in *Drum-Taps*, particularly in “To a Certain Civilian.” Whitman also, and rather rapidly, pivots in the early poem “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand.” It is difficult to imagine a poet more intimate with his audience than the one who lulls:

Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
With the comrade’s long-dwelling kiss or the new husband’s kiss...
Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing,
Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or rest upon your hip,
Carry me when you go forth over land or sea;
For thus merely touching you is enough, is best...”

And yet, in the very next stanza, the same poet taunts:

But these leaves conning you con at peril,
For these leaves and me you will not understand,
They will elude you at first and still more afterward, I will certainly elude you,
Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold!

²⁴ Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman’s Last.” *Lippincott’s Magazine* (August 1891), 256.

Already you see I have escaped from you.²⁵

This poetic method is characterized by a tide-like motion, and it ensures the active engagement of Whitman's audience. Whitman's readers cannot readily rely on their relationship to the author; they have to learn to keep up with him and the dynamism of his book. It is almost as though *Leaves of Grass* is a dance that requires a crash course in choreography. Whitman's goal with this playful, touch-and-go method is to gain the participation of his readers.

From the outset in 1855, Whitman believed that both the writer and the reader are required to make meaning in and through language. In the previous chapter of this dissertation, we witnessed Whitman confirm his understanding of a partnership between author and audience when he reflected to Traubel: "It would be a sacrilege to put a name there [on the title page of *Leaves of Grass*]— it would seem just like putting a name on the universe... at the most I am only the mouthpiece... I like the feeling of a general partnership—as if the *Leaves* was anybody's who chooses just as truly as mine."²⁶ Whitman's participatory ideal becomes essential in his late period and poetry. Death is his subject; the stakes could not be higher. In the appendices to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman offers a *memento mori* and asks readers to participate by wrestling with their own mortality, as though they were Jacob wrestling with God on the banks of the Jabbok in the Christian Bible. If readers refuse to participate now, if they insist on averting their gaze from the proffered decline and death of a beloved and once-robust poet, Whitman suggests, they forfeit the meaning of their own lives to mortality.

Song of Myself and *Sands at Seventy* both live in *Leaves of Grass*. To refuse engagement with the latter is to acknowledge, however passively, that death has the final say and is perhaps but a synonym for annihilation. Whitman did not think so, and he redeployed dependable poetic

²⁵ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 271.

²⁶ Qtd. by Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 324.

strategies— like his penchant for oscillation when it comes to the emotional availability of his speaker— and some new ones in the twilight poetry in order to engage readers with their mortality and help them avoid the mistakes of Tolstoy’s Pyotr Ivanovich—in order to craft an *Ars moriendi*. In the appendices, Whitman also redeploys, but vitally reconstructs, that most foundational, and perhaps it is fair to say infamous, feature of his early style—the catalogue. In the early poetry, like *Song of Myself*, Whitman’s catalogues toast the endless representative possibilities of poetry. Whitman dons and drops a variety of roles with ease in his early-career lists. But in the late verse, Whitman’s catalogues are associated with a fear representativeness will remain impossible and that much will be left out of *Leaves of Grass*— with a palpable anxiety about the unsaid and unsayable. “The Unexpress’d” includes a late catalogue but ends upon the extending possibility: “(Who knows? the best yet unexpress’d and lacking.)”²⁷

Determined to persist in poesy despite concerns about lingual insufficiency, Whitman reimagines his catalogues by transforming them into incantations. If comprehensiveness is impossible, perhaps a more limited, ritualistic list will be able to induce a kind of transport or trance and emancipate individual imaginations to travel or remember something akin to their own experiences. “Interpolation Sounds” of *Good-Bye My Fancy* might strike devotees of Whitman’s early work and style as a deeply strange poem. Like so many of its late companions, the piece is annotated and dated in a way that is totally foreign to Whitman’s early work. The poem’s lengthy footnote refers to both General Philip Sheridan and President Abraham Lincoln by name.²⁸ By contrast, Walt Whitman does not reference Abraham Lincoln by name once in the

²⁷ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 653.

²⁸ And this is not the only time Abraham Lincoln’s name appears in Walt Whitman’s late poetry. Another poem, originally published in 1888 and placed in the appendix *Sands at Seventy*, is entitled “Abraham Lincoln, Born Feb. 12, 1809.”

cluster of elegiac verse written to honor him in 1865— famous poems like “O Captain! My Captain!” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.”

This newfound concern with dates and details, which characterizes Walt Whitman’s late style, would compensate for lingual insufficiency by ensuring that *some* vital details are codified in collective memory and make it into *Leaves of Grass*. But more importantly, this late-style habit of dating and detailing is Whitman’s exercise in deathcare. With their proliferation of names, birth and death dates, the poems of *Sands at Seventy* in particular are an extended epitaph. These brief poems are aesthetic renderings of tombstones in *Leaves of Grass*; to skim *Sands at Seventy* is to survey a graveyard. Still other poems in *Sands at Seventy*, those without the explicit markers of epigraph, are about sickness, aging, and death—the experience of mortality. Whitman offers “As I Sit Writing Here,” “Queries to My Seventieth Year,” “After the Dazzle of Day,” “Halcyon Days,” “Going Somewhere,” “Thanks in Old Age,” “You Lingerin Sparse Leaves of Me,” “Old Age’s Lambent Peaks,” and more.

Whitman’s late poems of both *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy* investigate the supposed boundary between life and death and consider paranormal phenomena on earth. To fulfill this need of the *Ars moriendi* to address what might come after death, Walt Whitman transforms his early catalogues into rosaries and rites in the late verse. “Interpolation Sounds,” for example, recounts the speaker’s transport from General Sheridan’s funeral services in 1888 back to the battle scenes of the 1860s. A series of interpolation sounds catalyze this travel. Whitman attempts to reproduce his experience of spiritual transit or trance for his readers by inserting mesmerizing interpolation sounds into his poem. He intones: “Over and through the burial chant, / Organ and solemn service, sermon, bending priests... / The rifle-crack— the cannon thud— the rushing forth of men from their tents; / The clank of cavalry... The sound of

horses' hoofs departing."²⁹ Carefully crafting its alliteration, assonance, and steady forward motion, the poet reconstructs this catalogue into a proper "burial chant."³⁰

This late catalogue, turned charm of the dead, is brief compared to the catalogues which span pages upon pages of early works like *Song of Myself*. Surely, Walt Whitman's series of paralytic strokes after 1873 affected his ability to pen behemoths like *Song of Myself*. But late poems like "Interpolation Sounds" need be no longer. The burden of comprehensiveness is not upon them; theirs is the work of a conjurer. In one of *Good-Bye My Fancy*'s most surprising moments, Walt Whitman conducts a sort of literary séance. In "Old Chants," the poet summons "vast wondrous weird dream presences" before him. He calls on "...Egyptian priests, and those of Ethiopia, / The Hindu epics, the Grecian, Chinese, Persian... / The Iliad, Odyssey... / Hesiod, Eschylus, Sophocles, Merlin, Arthur... / Chaucer, Dante, flocks of singing birds... Shakespere, Schiller, Walter Scott, Tennyson."³¹ Here, we see evidence of the heightened cosmopolitanism of Walt Whitman's late style—his reaffirmation and extension of the early faith, so famously articulated in the 1855 preface to *Leaves*, that America is a global phenomenon. Importantly too, by including *Leaves of Grass* in such a train of sacred texts written by so many deceased, Walt Whitman confirms his ambition toward the *Ars moriendi*. Here, Whitman tells us outright that *Leaves of Grass* is directly relates to the dead and reaches toward immortality.

"A Twilight Song" likewise reveals Whitman's shifted emphasis on catalogues as chants, itineraries as incantations. These late-style séance poems, whose ancestors we found in those misty, apparition-filled bivouacs of *Drum-Taps*, are so important because they acknowledge human debt to history and advocate for the elevation of deathcare to the quotidian in the average,

²⁹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 644.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 646.

inevitably aging American's life. These poems ask readers to remember that they too will die, and they ask them to practice deathcare both for themselves and for their comrades. These poems quietly beg: what is history but the careful collection of sacred memories? What is history but deathcare practiced on a national scale? Walt Whitman's late style illumines life and death as shades of the same color, and these verses insist on audience engagement with the twain, unshakeable problems of "Life and Death." In the *Sands at Seventy Poem* by that name, Whitman croons in full: "The two old, simple problems ever intertwined, / Close home, elusive, present, baffled, grappled. / By each successive age insoluble, pass'd on, / To ours to-day—and we pass on the same."³² As Toni Morrison would do a century later, Walt Whitman asks his readers to understand the difference between—and carefully choose the more responsible of—the two potential meanings of the phrase *pass on*.

An American *Ars moriendi* so concerned with the art of dying well, the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*—crowned by the appendices *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*—offers much that might enrich the education and experiences of both patients and providers in modern American healthcare. I will turn to examine this topic more closely in the following chapter. Too, my argument about the craftsmanship of Walt Whitman's late style promises much insight to literary critics. In particular, viewing the Deathbed edition as the star of Walt Whitman's oeuvre grants us insight into genre theory and the developmental histories of modern poetry and American autobiography. Summarily, Walt Whitman's late poems form an *Ars moriendi*—but they are also rich examples of Imagist poetry and great American autobiography. The autobiographical element of *Leaves of Grass* is particularly vital for its achievement of *Ars moriendi*. I will survey the literary critical import of my argument in the remaining pages of this

³² Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 629.

chapter in order to demonstrate the wide berth of Walt Whitman's deathbed achievement and the significance of my dissertation project for a diversity of scholars to come.

WALT WHITMAN'S IMAGISM

William Carlos Williams, a physician and Modernist poet famous for works like *Spring and All* (1923), was a fan of Walt Whitman. Yet, in an essay penned for the centennial of *Leaves of Grass*, Williams negatively evaluated Whitman's postbellum arc: "... [Whitman] made no further progress as an artist, but, in spite of various topical achievements, continued to write with diminishing effectiveness for the remainder of his life."³³ And Williams was not the only Modernist poet to so chafe against Walt Whitman's tenure and lasting influence. Mina Loy published an essay called "Modern Poetry" in the 1925 issue of *Charm* magazine. Therein, Loy reveres a Modernist founding father: "To speak of the modern movement is to speak of him... for without the discoveries he made with his poet's instinct for poetry, this modern movement would still be rather a nebula than the constellation it has become."³⁴ This poet of whom she speaks, with his poet's instinct for poetry, is Ezra Pound. Although Pound famously resisted the influence of Walt Whitman, he eventually succumbed and made "A Pact" with the poet in *Lustra*:

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman—

I have detested you long enough.

I come to you as a grown child

Who has had a pig-headed father;

I am old enough now to make friends...

³³ William Carlos Williams, "An Essay on *Leaves of Grass*" (In "*Leaves of Grass*": *One Hundred Years After*, ed. Milton Hundus, Stanford University Press, 1955), 23.

³⁴ Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (selected and edited by Roger L. Conover, 1996, reprinted Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 158.

Let there be commerce between us.³⁵

And there was commerce indeed.

For his editorial work in the 1914 anthology *Des Imagistes*, Ezra Pound is considered the founder of Imagism— that vital strain of Modernist poetics which emphasizes concision and clarity of a single, foregrounded image. Introducing his anthology of Imagist verse, William Pratt touches on the centrality of Pound to the movement— while also hinting that the founding mantle might not actually belong to him:

[Imagism] gave Modernism its start early in the twentieth century; it also gave new definition to poetry written much earlier. The Imagists, taking Pound at his word to ‘Make it New,’ opened the way for radical experiments in poetic technique, helping readers understand what earlier poets like Emily Dickinson and Stephen Crane had been doing decades earlier... now both Dickinson and Crane can be seen as ‘Pre-Imagists,’ anticipating the poetic style to come.³⁶

Although Walt Whitman was of course not a card-carrying Imagist in 1914, I argue that he is more than a precursor to the movement. *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*, those clusters which make *Leaves of Grass* new in its Deathbed edition, are the first largely Imagist collections penned by a major poet in the long history of American poetry. The clusters even have their own Modernist manifesto-like preface.

Ezra Pound tried to resist Walt Whitman’s influence on Imagism, and Amy Lowell may have done so as well. Critical of Pound’s understanding of poetry, Amy Lowell took charge of the Imagist movement after the publication of *Des Imagistes*— a coup that Pound considered

³⁵ Ezra Pound, *Lustra, with Earlier Poems* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1917), 21.

³⁶ William Pratt, Preface to the Revised Edition of *The Imagist Poem: Modern Poetry in Miniature* (1963, reprinted with a new preface from William Pratt, University of New Orleans Publishing, 2001), 7.

tyrannical (Thereafter, Pound denigrated Imagism as mere “Amygism” and endorsed his own version of the poetic mode called “Vorticism.”). In her introduction to their annual anthology rechristened *Some Imagist Poets* of 1915, Lowell may be referring to, indeed slighting, Walt Whitman when she mentions “a cosmic poet.” Lowell insists: “We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason that we oppose the cosmic poet.”³⁷ However, hard as Lowell or Pound might try to resist, Imagism is firmly and rightly linked to Walt Whitman. I mentioned that Justin Kaplan insists on the early Imagism of Whitman’s 1853/1854 poem “Pictures.”³⁸ Richard Chase considers “Song of Myself,” among other things, an “extraordinary collection of small imagist poems.”³⁹ And John Schwiebert carefully studies the Imagism of Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* in his “Passage to More than Imagism: Whitman’s Imagistic Poems.”⁴⁰ Schwiebert is right to focus on *Drum-Taps*, from which we have seen that *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy* descend.

Walt Whitman’s late style is largely Imagist, and I want to take a clipped but close look at the flowering of this Imagism in order to demonstrate the myriad benefits—to cultural historians, physicians, patients, *and* literary critics—of studying Whitman’s final clusters of verse. They are an *Ars moriendi*, but they also represent early Modernist stirrings and promise new possibilities for the periodization of American literature. In his manifesto-like preface to the *Good-Bye My Fancy*, which includes manifesto-like zest “or rather defiance,” Whitman refers to his brief old-age poems as “little tags,” “fringe-dots,” “last droplets,” and “certain chirps.”⁴¹ We know these

³⁷ Amy Lowell, Preface to *Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915), vii.

³⁸ Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life*, 173.

³⁹ Qtd. by *Walt Whitman: A Life*, 173.

⁴⁰ John E. Schwiebert, “Passage to More than Imagism: Whitman’s Imagistic Poems” (*Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 8, no. 1 (1990): 16-28, doi: <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1269>).

⁴¹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 637.

apparent diminutions are deceptive, and the poems of *Good-Bye My Fancy* prove a host of incisive meditations and aesthetic innovations. If these short verses are indeed mere pieces of what Whitman might have once considered a proper poem—the shards are quite sharp, and so many of them foreground crystal-clear images so important to Imagism. *Good-Bye My Fancy* alone offers a plethora of picture-poems to choose from, and I am especially tempted by “Old Age’s Ship and Crafty Death’s” and “Osceola.” But here, I will treat “The Pallid Wreath” as our representative example of Whitman’s Imagism and the clearest demonstration of Whitman’s collaboration in the Modernist mission at the turn of the century.

After she referenced “Imagist” poetry in the second issue of *Poetry* magazine, Harriet Monroe was inundated with requests for more information. Readers wondered: what exactly is Imagism? In answer, Monroe published two short essays in the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*. The first by F.S. Flint explained that the Imagists “...were not a revolutionary school; their only endeavor was to write in accordance with the best tradition, as they found it in the best writers of all time, — in Sappho, Catullus, Villon.” He listed three rules of Imagism: “1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome.”⁴² In the second essay, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” Ezra Pound more famously summarized: “An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives the sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the

⁴² Qtd. by William Pratt, Introduction to *The Imagist Poem: Modern Poetry in Miniature* (University of New Orleans Publishing, 1963), 30-31.

presence of the greatest works of art.⁴³ Whitman's "The Pallid Wreath" is one such work of art. Having perfected his symbolic work with triads in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman introduces a trinity of Imagist instants in time in "The Pallid Wreath," cued by the poem's *now*, *no*, and *last nights*. Here is Whitman's poem in full, which foregrounds such a sharply sorrowful image of "The Pallid Wreath:"

Somehow I cannot let it go yet, funeral though it is,
 Let it remain back there on its nail suspended,
 With pink, blue, yellow, all blanch'd, and the white *now* gray and ashy,
 One wither'd rose put years ago for thee, dear friend;
 But I do not forget thee. Hast thou then faded?
 Is the odor exhaled? Are the colors, vitalities, dead?
No, while memories subtly play – the past vivid as ever;
 For *but last night* I woke, and in that spectral ring saw thee,
 Thy smile, eyes, face, calm, silent, loving as ever:
 So let the wreath hang still awhile within my eye-reach,
 It is not yet dead to me, nor even pallid.⁴⁴

The image of the pallid wreath crystallizes and so exclusively captures the speaker's gaze three times in the poem. And each iteration of the image allows the speaker further "freedom from time limits and space limits" until they can actually see their dead friend again. Indeed, this otherworldly reunion is a "sudden growth" from the "spectral ring," and such a séance-of-sorts profoundly demonstrates the conjuring power of Imagist poems that Pound would eventually

⁴³ Qtd. by William Pratt, Introduction to *The Imagist Poem: Modern Poetry in Miniature* (University of New Orleans Publishing, 1963), 32.

⁴⁴ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 641, emphasis mine.

address in *Poetry* magazine—a conjuring power granted fullest power in its context of the *Ars moriendi*.⁴⁵

Arguably the most famous Imagist poem, Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” reads in full: “The *apparition* of these faces in the crowd: / Petals, on a wet black bough.”⁴⁶ Walt Whitman’s largely Imagist cluster *Good-Bye My Fancy* anticipates these ghostly growths of the early twentieth century and indeed primes the poetic ground for them. The poem which precedes “The Pallid Wreath” in *Good-Bye My Fancy* is called “Apparitions” and is a witness to the continuous conjuring power of Whitman’s Imagist poems in the cluster: “A vague mist hanging ‘round half the pages: / (Sometimes how strange and clear to the soul, / That all these solid things are indeed but apparitions, concepts, non-realities.)”⁴⁷ The Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, so profoundly changed by the inclusion of so many Imagist poems in the annexes, belongs to the initiation of Imagism in the history of American poetry. The séance poems like “The Pallid Wreath” have vital significance for twenty-first century patients and providers in need of a crash course in deathcare, and they grant insight into the first stirrings of Imagism in American poetry.

AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE ARS MORIENDI

Walt Whitman’s *Ars moriendi* is comprised of much Imagist poetry. Its achievement is also dependent upon its generic engagement with autobiography, or the record of the whole of Whitman’s experience with which we began this chapter. In Camden, Horace Traubel evaluated the genre and *Leaves of Grass*: “Taking autobiography in its finer form, the best autobiography is not that which a man starts deliberately out to write... but that which flows spontaneously from

⁴⁵ Qtd. by William Pratt, Introduction, 32.

⁴⁶ Pound, *Lustra*, emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 641.

his own personality. By such a test, *Leaves of Grass* is certainly one of the exclusive books in the group of the great autobiographies.” Walt Whitman responded: “That is well and profoundly put: even if not true as applied to *Leaves of Grass* is true in general: that the best autobiography is not built but grows.”⁴⁸ If Whitman is not fully convinced of the intersection between autobiography and *Leaves of Grass* here, he demonstrates a conviction similar to Traubel’s by his late obsession with famed American autobiographer Ulysses S. Grant.

In a chapter of *Walt Whitman’s Reconstruction* aptly titled “Whitman’s General,” Martin Buinicki traces the development of Whitman’s esteem for General Grant over time. The scholar illuminates the ways in which Whitman came to identify with Grant particularly as a thinker and a writer toward the end of both their lives. Buinicki remembers another conversation between the Camden comrades in which Horace Traubel compares Whitman’s thinking to Grant’s and receives the following response from the poet: “Horace, I shouldn’t wonder but I’m treed: yes, I guess you’ve got the facts in the case.”⁴⁹ Like the 1891-1892 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Ulysses S. Grant’s long-awaited *Personal Memoirs* are an example of deathbed literature and late style.

Penned in the final year of his life as he battled terminal cancer of the throat, Grant’s *Memoirs* were published posthumously—and promoted to great success by his friend Mark Twain. At the end of his *Personal Memoirs*, a moment which also marked the end of his life, Ulysses S. Grant pauses at the threshold of departure and remarks: “I feel that we are on the eve of a new era, when there is to be great harmony between the Federal and Confederate. I cannot stay to be a living witness to the correctness of this prophecy; but I feel it within me that it is to be so.”⁵⁰ In the second title poem of *Good-Bye My Fancy*, that which concludes the cluster and

⁴⁸ Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. III, 355.

⁴⁹ Qtd. by Buinicki, *Walt Whitman’s Reconstruction*, 132.

⁵⁰ Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 779.

the whole of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman threatens to upend his witness and entire project by saying goodbye, admitting death as a sort of defeat.

But, playful to the last, Whitman likewise turns in the doorway and looks forward to the collaboration and achievements of twentieth and twenty-first century poets, autobiographers, and authors only of themselves: “May-be it is yourself now really ushering me to the true songs, (who knows?) / Maybe it is you the mortal knob really undoing, turning— so now finally, / Good-bye — and hail! my Fancy.”⁵¹ With his final hello, Walt Whitman firmly places the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* at the beginning of a long history of American poetry and autobiography, and he achieves the vital horizon of hope required of the *Ars moriendi*. Whitman himself articulates just how essential that “hail!” is at the very end of his book. Without it, the book would admit the finality of departure and death, but Whitman resolves: “I am not prepared to admit fraud in the scheme of the universe—yet without immortality all would be sham and sport of the most tragic nature.”⁵²

Clarifying what exactly he means by immortality, or as he liked to call it, “the fact,” Whitman offers: “When I say immortality I say identity— the survival of the personal soul— your survival, my survival.”⁵³ And so, Whitman affirms what we suspected when we studied “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” of *Drum-Taps* in the previous chapter of this dissertation; the late poetry prizes the soul over the body. However, Whitman’s beloved body does not disappear entirely from the appendices. Bernardini and Price concur when Mario Corona argues “...that in the annexes Whitman gives life to a *renewed* poetry of the body: no longer the young and muscular body of the first editions, but that of an aging and weak body, preparing to die.”⁵⁴ In the preface

⁵¹ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 655.

⁵² Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* vol. I, 149.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Qtd. by Bernardini and Price, “Whitman’s ‘Deathbed’ Radicalism,” 30, emphasis mine.

to *Good-Bye My Fancy*, Whitman foregrounds his “lulls of illness and exhaustion,” his “eyes plainly warn[ing] they are dimming,” and he describes his body as being “much like some hard-cased dilapidated grim ancient shell-fish or time-bang’d conch (no legs, utterly non-locomotive) cast up high and dry on the shore-sands.”⁵⁵ During these Camden years, Whitman also posed for a portrait by famed realist painter Thomas Eakins. He may have even posed nude for a series of Eakins’s photographs on the body. The sustained, if altered, presence of the body in the late poetry is vital for the accomplishment of the *Ars moriendi*.

Still, Whitman’s primary corporeal concern during the Camden years was with the body of his book. In May of 1888, Whitman meditated on this the body of his book: “You can detach poems from the book and wonder why they were written. But if you see them in their place in the book you know why I wrote them.”⁵⁶ A few months later, in August, while explaining his disapproval of a Walt Whitman calendar⁵⁷, the poet reiterated: “*Leaves of Grass* does not lend itself to piecemeal quotation: can only find its reflection in ensemble, ensemble: cannot be rendered by any selection of pretty lines, strange allusions, passages from here and there: it belongs to bulk, mass, unity: must be seen with reference to its eligibility to express world-meanings rather than literary prettiness.”⁵⁸ The world-meanings Whitman was after regarded the surety and safety of meaning itself in the face of mortality. In its Deathbed edition, *Leaves of Grass* is an *Ars moriendi*, and it is essential that Whitman attached the clusters *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy* as permanent appendices to the volume (as opposed to, for example,

⁵⁵ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 637-638.

⁵⁶ Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* vol. I, 105.

⁵⁷ Though he disapproved of this and any other effort in “miniaturizing” his *magnum opus*, Whitman did not halt the production of the calendar, perhaps in part because his friend William D. O’Connor’s nieces were responsible.

⁵⁸ Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* vol. II, 115.

Drum-Taps, which was an appendix to the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass* before being integrated into the body of the great work).

Whitman's appendices, with their final hello trumping a would-be farewell, are the open palms at the end of his book. To conclude this lifelong effort in autobiography and *Ars moriendi* with appendices is to refuse conclusion. This is the ultimate, positive manifestation of what Robert Leigh Davis calls Whitman's oscillation, what I have called his devotion to the *via media*, and what Keats called Negative Capability. Like the greatest of American autobiographers and his contemporary Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman offers a non-ending which suggests that the self is a project to be pursued *ad infinitum*. D.H. Lawrence claims that Whitman's poems are "huge fat tomb-plants, great rank graveyard growths."⁵⁹ So they are, but Whitman's Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* and *Ars moriendi* does not foreclose on the possibilities of life after death.

⁵⁹ Qtd. by David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 238.

CHAPTER FOUR: WALT WHITMAN AND THE *ARS MORIENDI* IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

If I had to choose, were I looking about for a profession, I should choose that of a doctor. Yes; widely opposite as science and the emotional elements are, they might be joined in the medical profession, and there would be great opportunities for developing them. Nowhere is there such a call for them... Oh, a doctor should be a superb fellow. He does not approach at present what he should be.

Walt Whitman¹

INTRODUCTION TO THE CONTEMPORARY MORTALITY CRISIS IN THE UNITED STATES

Advances in modern medicine and biotechnology—among other quality-of-life improvements made possible by industrialization—have resulted in unprecedented human longevity. In particular, twenty-first-century Americans are achieving some of the longest life spans ever recorded.² But these medical advances have serious side effects and have caused a cultural regression in the United States. American surgeon Atul Gawande studies the problem closely in his monograph *Being Mortal*. Simply put, modern Americans have forgotten how to die. Over a century removed from Walt Whitman's America, Gawande foregrounds the reality with a statistic: "As recently as 1945, most deaths occurred in the home. By the 1980s, just 17% did."³

Death and dying—communal processes just as birth and pregnancy are for a mother and babe—are now sequestered in hospitals, intensive care units, and nursing homes. The experience

¹ Qtd. by Harold Aspiz, *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* (University of Illinois Press, 1980), 37.

² While this is true, the CDC has identified a recent decline in American life expectancy, largely due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic: "Life expectancy at birth for women in the United States dropped 0.8 years from 79.9 years in 2020 to 79.1 in 2021, while life expectancy for men dropped one full year, from 74.2 years in 2020 to 73.2 in 2021."; "Life Expectancy in the U.S. Dropped for the Second Year in a Row in 2021," *CDC Center for Health Statistics*, August 31, 2022, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2022/20220831.htm#print.

³ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (Picador, 2014), 6.

is lonely and spiritually sterile. But modern Americans are not just dying in wards and borrowed beds, they are dying unprepared—very often in pain both physical and psychic. Ernest Becker points out that these Americans no longer believe “that death is the ultimate promotion, the final ritual elevation to a higher form of life, to the enjoyment of eternity in some form... which is what makes the fear of death so prominent a part of our psychological makeup.”⁴ Paralyzed by that fear, twenty-first-century Westerners avoid and deny death until it finally catches them unawares and unprepared. The notion of a “Good Death” is no longer the horizon for which a citizen is trained and eventually strains.

Having witnessed the zenith of this cultural crisis—with its roots in the waning nineteenth and the twentieth centuries—Atul Gawande considers modern medical school curriculum to be largely responsible for the persistence of this problem. The industrialized world, and especially the United States, has determined death to be the enemy of modern medicine. The physician’s role is to defeat death—not, as it once was and ought to be, to reduce suffering. As Toni Morrison pointed out in her 1993 Nobel Lecture, human singularity lies in the fact that we know how our species’ story ends. We die. The start of our knowledge is that our end will come. Deep in our bones, humans know that a physician can only delay—and never defeat—death. And yet, that is exactly what we ask them to do both in and beyond medical school. An autodidact in deathcare, Gawande remembers: “I learned about a lot of things in medical school, but mortality wasn’t one of them... The one time I remember discussing mortality was during an hour we spent on *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy’s classic novella. It was in a weekly seminar called Patient-Doctor—part of the school’s effort to make us more rounded and humane physicians.”⁵

⁴ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (1973, reprinted New York: Free Press, 2023), xxvii.

⁵ Gawande, *Being Mortal*, I.

One hour devoted to the event we will know, individually, as the end of the world. Walt Whitman reminds us: “One world is aware and by far the largest to me, and that is myself.”⁶

The rest of medical instruction is intervention. Modern physicians have a nearly limitless arsenal with which they might delay death, and in the false name of defeat— urged to do so both by their training and by desperately, understandably hopeful patients— they now intervene past the point of benevolence. In the United States, modern medicine looks like attrition warfare, and it is not just the patients who suffer. Like the doomed twenty-one pilots of Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons*, healthcare providers are charged with a hopeless mission. These physicians are primed to view their inability to seize immortality for their patients as a professional if not a personal failure. It is difficult to imagine the emotional turmoil—perhaps even agony—experienced by the one who is damned to violate the Hippocratic Oath by the very physicians who taught them the words. Gawande surveys the scene:

In the United States, 25 percent of all Medicare spending is for the 5 percent of patients who are in their final year of life, and most of that money goes for care in their last couple of months that is of little apparent benefit... Our medical system is excellent at trying to stave off death with \$12,000-a-month chemotherapy, \$4,000-a-day intensive care, \$7,000-an-hour surgery. But, ultimately, death comes, and few are good at knowing when to stop.⁷

Conversing with Jacques Choron and his *Death and Western Thought*, Ernest Becker adds: “the ‘postponement of death is not a solution to the fear of death... there still will remain the fear of dying prematurely.’ The smallest virus or the stupidest accident would deprive a man not of 90

⁶ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 207.

⁷ Gawande, *Being Mortal*, 153-154.

years but of 900—and would then be ten times more absurd.”⁸ Death doula Alua Arthur illuminates the lived experience of this reality chronicled by Gawande and Becker when she relates client interactions in her recent book *briefly perfectly human*. She recollects one such client as Jessica. Suffering from uterine cancer, Jessica is traveling the world on a bucket-list tour when she serendipitously meets the soon-to-become death doula Arthur. Jessica responds to the acolyte’s rather direct, if intuitive, questions about death:

Jessica tells me this is the first time anyone has asked her these questions or wanted to listen to her talk about her death. Although her oncology program has paired her with a psychiatrist, he is only concerned with how she is living with the disease. He hasn’t asked her about dying. Nor have her family and friends made space for her to talk about this fundamental, existential question. She says that whenever she talks about death, they encourage her to have hope, look on the bright side, and focus on healing... this evasion is a form of existential gaslighting.⁹

Jessica’s experience is unfortunately representative of the average American’s in the twenty-first century.

Our collective denial of death—this “existential gaslighting” —is a cancer at the heart of American culture. We are talking about folie à deux on a national scale, because we have made an enemy out of an inevitability. Healing— finding our way back to a collective knowing that is our birth (and death) right— begins with the acknowledgement that deathcare *is* healthcare and a subsequent adjustment to medical curricula across the country. Largely thanks to death-positive authors and advocates like Atul Gawande, Paul Kalanithi, Caitlin Doughty, Alua Arthur, and,

⁸ Becker, *Denial*, 266.

⁹ Alua Arthur, death doula, *briefly perfectly human: Making an Authentic Life by Getting Real About the End* (Mariner Books, 2024), 9.

before them, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Ernest Becker, marked progress has been made. For example, select medical schools now host memorial services for the cadavers studied by their preclinical students and formally recognize the donors as the training physicians' first patients. This is a powerful, public recognition of deathcare as healthcare. We can begin to imagine a future in which death doulas, morticians, palliative care specialists, hospice nurses, and other deathcare experts are an active and early presence on care teams. The advocacy of such authors and affiliate organizations like the Order of the Good Death has achieved some success in nudging the United States back to an ideal of a Good Death, but there is still plenty of progress to be made. Geriatrics units, proven successes, are closing across the country, the longevity movement only gains steam, and stories like Jessica's of *briefly perfectly human* demonstrate an overwhelming, common American need for death literacy. A pedagogical pivot, a reconsideration of the primary source material with which we train both physicians, and, through them, their patients can catalyze the necessary cultural change. Funeral director and deathcare advocate Caitlin Doughty confirms the collaborative nature of this issue: "Death avoidance is not an individual failing; it's a cultural one. Facing death is not for the faint-hearted. It is far too challenging to expect that each citizen will do so on his or her own. Death acceptance is the responsibility of all death professionals—funeral directors, cemetery managers, hospital workers."¹⁰ I am arguing that it is the responsibility of teachers too. In particular, death acceptance, death literacy, and the rights and rites of deathcare are duties of instructors in medicine and the medical humanities.

Doughty reminds us of what hardly needs to be said: death is a difficult subject. But dying is the work of our lives, and death the context that endows human life and language with meaning.

¹⁰ Caitlin Doughty, *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 232.

We cannot wait until our ends to begin, and we cannot exercise being mortal in isolation from our communities. Physicians and patients—all of us—are implicated in the medical humanities and find ourselves in need of a crash course, one anchored by a Rosetta Stone of death and dying. Americans yearn for death literacy. America needs its *Ars moriendi*. Thankfully, it has long had one waiting in the 1891-1892 Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

Guides to the art of dying well were once quite popular. Gawande reminds us that “a medieval version published in Latin in 1415 was reprinted in more than a hundred editions across Europe.”¹¹ The current cultural crisis in a United States that has long operated without one indicates how vital such sacred texts are to civilization. Studying human composting in twenty-first century North Carolina, Caitlin Doughty references Walt Whitman. In her book *From Here to Eternity*, Doughty remembers that the poet marveled at the earth’s ability to compost carrion and catalyze metamorphosis.¹² The mortician does *not* mention that in the poem “This Compost,” Walt Whitman is also terrified of the planet’s transformative power and the inextricability of life and death. This willingness—the poet’s skillful ability to sit with the weightiest “both/and”s of human existence, to be both inspired and repulsed by mortality—speaks to the fitness of Walt Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* for our national healthcare curriculum. This is semi-secular sublimity. In other words, there is a philosophical and spiritual openness about *Leaves of Grass*, designed to serve the ideal America in which every citizen is free to live—and die—on their own terms. The spirit of the text is in harmony with that of the country’s founding civil documents—“GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT[s],” in Frederick Douglass’s estimation.¹³ In this chapter, I will revisit the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*,

¹¹ Gawande, *Being Mortal*, 156.

¹² Doughty, *From Here to Eternity*, 133.

¹³ Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” 1852, in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, ed. by Ira Dworkin (Penguin Books, 2014), 144.

highlighting its fitness and functionality as an American *Ars moriendi* to meet the contemporary cultural crisis surrounding death and dying. Extending my work in the preceding chapter, I will pay special attention to the effectiveness of Whitman's late style in achieving this end of his *magnum opus*. Along the way, I will relate some representative experiences of modern medicine, stories like Jessica's which demonstrate the reliability with which we isolate our actively dying and actively mourning compatriots— and thus the severity of our cultural problem.

ENTER WALT WHITMAN, ENDLESSLY ROCKING

With the 1891-1892 Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman provides the cornerstone of American deathcare education. Robert Leigh Davis affirms Whitman's conscious centrality to medicine and the medical humanities:

Whitman was a poet with an eye on the future. He was acutely aware of the rise and fall of literary reputations, and he hated to think that his poetry might someday become quaint or irrelevant like the genteel poets he learned from and despised. He wanted, above all, to be useful to a future America, and he believed that the reader best suited to understand his project would have to be a doctor.¹⁴

Of course, as Alua Arthur demonstrates, a vast array of resources is necessary to help modern Americans healthfully reconnect with their mortality. Manuals like BJ Miller and Shoshana Berger's recent *A Beginner's Guide to the End: Practical Advice for Living Life and Facing Death* are invaluable for grieving and dying people faced with unfamiliar and overwhelming stacks of paperwork about insurance, the final disposition of remains, wills and the probate process, and so on. But Arthur also attests: "Sometimes the paperwork, plans, and documents are already firmly in place and there are no glaring omissions. Sometimes the client needs something

¹⁴ Robert Leigh Davis, *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* (University of California Press, 1997), 120.

else that's less tangible and hard for them to describe, though the yearning for it is there."¹⁵ Walt Whitman's *magnum opus* offers that *something else*. When he describes the changing attitudes about aging in America—the experience going from “a shared, multigenerational responsibility to a more or less private state—something experienced largely alone or with the aid of doctors and institutions—” Atul Gawande cites the positive example of Emily Dickinson, who, in keeping with nineteenth-century customs, remained in her childhood home throughout adulthood in order that she might care for her parents as they aged and eventually died. Gawande might have also cited the example of Walt Whitman, Dickinson's fellow poet and deathcare expert, for dying was the work of Walt Whitman's long life.

The preceding chapter's study of *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, with its heartbeat “Death, death, death, death, death,” affirmed that Whitman conducted a lifelong dance with death. In that seminal poem, which would come to spearhead the cluster *Sea-Drift* in the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman learns that it is not just beauty, but also death that is capable of radically and productively de-centering the self and inspiring artistic expression. Therein, he dramatizes his metamorphosis into a poet proper:

Demon or bird! (said the boy's soul,
 Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?
 For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I have heard you,
 Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake...
 A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die...
 Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before...
 The messenger there arous'd, the fire, the sweet hell within.¹⁶

¹⁵ Arthur, *briefly perfectly human*, 156.

¹⁶ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 392-393.

It is vital for the achievement of an *Ars moriendi* that this poem about the origins of art is also explicitly one about death. Whitman's poem, a source for so much of his late style, makes clear: art requires death (if only an ego death), and death is an art. *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* sketches the need for an *Ars moriendi*, or the greater Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* in which it would eventually find its home. If death is an art, one ought to study and become an artist.

It is also indispensable that *Out of the Cradle* centers a young boy. The poem is so much about cradles and children that it was originally entitled "A Child's Reminiscence" upon its debut in the New York *Saturday Press* on Christmas Eve of 1859. By foregrounding extreme youth in the face of death, Whitman effectively communicates that death is not the exclusive concern of old age, but rather a project that we might each begin to shape and participate in very early on. *Out of the Cradle* is another threshing floor—as we saw in the last chapter, for Whitman's late style—and also, more specifically, the one upon which he works out his understanding that "Life and Death" are inextricably intertwined and do not maintain a relationship defined in Manichaeian terms. Of course, it is a psychic challenge to consider youth and death at once. But as Whitman and the *Ars moriendi* insist, it is also a liberating feat. From this vista, we gain perspective and the power to make daily choices that might enrich a life we cannot know will be long.

Besides, as the mortician Caitlin Doughty points out: "Every time a woman gives birth, she is creating not only a life, but also a death. Samuel Beckett wrote that women 'give birth astride of a grave.'"¹⁷ This point is belabored by fellow death activists like Alua Arthur who remembers:

¹⁷ Caitlin Doughty, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes & Other Lessons from the Crematory* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 172; Doughty continues: "In many ways, women are death's natural companions." Perhaps this same wisdom explains Whitman's claim to Horace Traubel that *Leaves of Grass*, an *Ars moriendi*, is "essentially a woman's book," Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. II (D. Appelton, 1908), September 16, 1888.

“My birth was my first death—from the womb into this world. I changed form. Changed the way I breathe. Changed environments and left the only place I knew thus far—the comfort of my mother’s body.”¹⁸ Whitman’s late verse returns to and reaffirms the revelations of *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*. The first annex, *Sands at Seventy*, opens with a brief poem entitled “Mannahatta.” In full, the poem reads: “My city’s fit and noble name resumed, / Choice aboriginal name, with marvellous beauty, meaning, / A rocky founded island—shores where ever gayly dash the coming, going, hurrying sea waves.”¹⁹ The poem sees Whitman inaugurate his final clusters with a return to his origins. Actually, he visits his own *prehistory* in “Mannahatta,” citing the city’s “aboriginal name.” By doing so, Whitman confirms the lesson of *Out of the Cradle*: birth and death are intricately related—unfixed points on the cycle of cosmic creation. Death, like birth, invites and rewards preparation—Walt Whitman’s *Ars moriendi* coaches.

“Mannahatta,” a return to the rock that forms Whitman’s foundation, also revisits *Out of the Cradle*’s foundational rocking, or the gestational motion of the ocean. *Sands at Seventy* is essentially a seafaring collection. The cluster’s second poem, “Paumanok,” begins: “Sea-beauty! stretch’d and basking!” and the third, “From Montauk Point,” ends: “The wild unrest, the snowy, curling caps—that inbound urge and urge of waves, / Seeking the shores forever.”²⁰ Herein, the ocean “throbs” and “dilates” like an expectant mother.²¹ By rooting his late style in the restless ocean, his foundational metaphor for understanding the oscillation and vital chemistry between life and death since *Out of the Cradle*, Whitman injects familiarity and a sense of safety into his *magnum opus* that is vital to the *Ars moriendi*. In other words, if he does

¹⁸ Arthur, *briefly perfectly human*, 19.

¹⁹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 613.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 619.

not resolve the mystery of creation, Walt Whitman does insist that death is part of the creative process and not purely destructive or fearful.

Walt Whitman's return to the ocean in the appendices is also a key aesthetic anchoring. The symbolic marriage of death with the ocean unlocks artistic resonance in readers' minds that is essential for the *Ars moriendi*, the first word of which, of course, translates to *art*. In other words, only the ocean, eternally bewitching to humans despite its episodic violence and enduring mystery, could convince wary, death-anxious Americans that death can indeed be an art. Whitman's thematic devotion to the ocean also aids the achievement of his *Ars moriendi* in that it reflects processes of the aging mind. Like the sea, the mortal mind is mobile in a way that can be increasingly (frustratingly, even frighteningly) mysterious as a person grows older. Whitman's late, short poem "Memories" syntactically mimics a wave meeting the shore and describes the mind in the process of recollection: "How sweet the silent backward tracings! / The wanderings as in dreams—the meditation of old times resumed— their loves, joys, persons, voyages."²²

In these late clusters, Whitman continuously portrays death and dying, which require recollection as well as projection, as perilous but worthwhile voyages. And in "Old Age's Ship & Crafty Death's," the poet promises a worthy destination: "the deepest, freest waters."²³ Another phrase for this destination might be a Good Death. In the previous chapter, I studied Walt Whitman's reconstruction of early-style staples in the design of his late style. He so clearly returns to *Out of the Cradle* in the appendices—thematically, symbolically, and psychically. *Sands at Seventy* is essentially oceanic, and it even features *Out of the Cradle*'s fraternal twin: "Of That Blithe Throat of Thine." Once again, our focus is on a lonely bird. The speaker listens in as this somber, solitary singer nuances the lessons of his youth. In full, this late piece reads:

²² Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 616.

²³ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 642.

[*More than eighty-three degrees north— about a good day's steaming distance to the Pole by one of our fast oceaners in clear water— Greely the explorer heard the song of a single snow-bird merrily sounding over the desolation.*]

Of that blithe throat of thine from arctic bleak and blank,
 I'll mind the lesson, solitary bird— let me too welcome chilling drifts,
 E'en the profoundest chill, as now— a torpid pulse, a brain unnerv'd
 Old age land-lock'd within its winter bay— (cold, cold, O cold!)
 These snowy hairs, my feeble arm, my frozen feet,
 From them thy faith, thy rule I take, and grave it to the last;
 Not summer's zone's alone— not chants of youth, or south's warm tides alone,
 But held by sluggish floes, pack'd in the northern ice, the cumulus of years,
 These with gay heart I also sing."²⁴

The style has changed, and so the setting. From Paumanok to the Pole, the boy has grown old and writes shorter, annotated poems. But still, he sings, and so too does the solitary bird.

Whitman's constant homecoming or callbacks to *Cradle* in the appendices— and in *Sands at Seventy* in particular— seriously complicates Edward Said's theory of late style that we surveyed in the introduction. But the phenomenon does achieve an *Ars moriendi* of *Leaves of Grass* in its insistence, over and again, that creation— of a life, a book, a single poem or style— involves revision, which is submission to myriad little deaths. In "A Persian Lesson" of *Good-Bye My Fancy*, "a greybeard sufi" offers his final instruction: "Would you know... / The something never still'd— never entirely gone? The invisible need of every seed? / 'It is the central urge in every atom... / To return to its divine source and origin."²⁵ By making constant pilgrimage to *Cradle* in

²⁴ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 623.

²⁵ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 651.

the appendices, his own divine source and origin, Whitman assures his audience that death is not synonymous with annihilation, but a mysterious and even rich part of life itself. The gift of being mortal, of being born into such a self-aware species, is to live *and* to die. Death is context, and death is fuel for the essential chemistry of creation.

RITUAL AND REQUIRED COLLABORATION

Like “Of That Blithe Throat of Thine” and “A Persian Lesson,” many of Walt Whitman’s other late poems are examples of metacommentary, or poems about his own poetry. An earlier example from *Sands at Seventy* comes in the BY THAT LONG SCAN OF WAVES subsection of “Fancies at Navesink.” Therein, Whitman ponders: “My three-score years of life summ’d up, and more, and past, / By any grand ideal tried, intentionless, the whole a nothing, / And haply yet some drop within God’s scheme’s ensemble— some wave, or part of a wave, / Like one of yours, ye multitudinous ocean.”²⁶ In the previous chapter, I argued that Whitman’s diminutive references to his late poems— “tags,” “fringe-dots,” “specks,” “stains,” “certain chirps” —were classic examples of the poet’s playful scheming designed to bolster reader participation and investment. In these lines from “Fancies at Navesink,” Whitman’s diminutive deception receives a death blow when he references his brief, twilight poems as “drops.”²⁷ Careful readers will note that he similarly references them in the second poem of *Good-Bye My Fancy* titled “Lingering Last Drops.” Therein, the poet interrogates these late, persistent poems of his: “And whence and why come you?” Originally puzzled by their appearance, Whitman quickly concludes that these drops are part and parcel of the preceding storm, a continuity of the *Calamus* cluster in which he

²⁶ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 620.

²⁷ In a fit illustration of the connections between Whitman’s Civil War poems and his late verse, the poet originally drafted “Fancies at Navesink” on the back of a *Drum-Taps* broadside. The Rome Brothers had printed fifty such broadsides to advertise *Drum-Taps* in its original conception. That version was subsequently scrapped, and Whitman used the obsolete ads as draft paper decades later. For more information on the material history of *Drum-Taps*, see “The Disorder of Drum-Taps” by Ted Genoways.

first describes his poems as spontaneous “Trickle drops... bleeding drops... confession drops.”²⁸

Whitman’s late lingering drops confirm this their lineage when they respond to the poet’s query:

“...we drift here with the rest, / ...we linger’d and lagg’d – but were wafted at last, and are now here, / To make the passing shower’s concluding drops.”²⁹

In meta poems like “Fancies at Navesink,” Whitman affirms the bloodline of his late verse. He illustrates that his late style, fresh in so many ways, is not a complete stranger to his early style but a descendent thereof. This meta poetry coheres and completes the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and, vitally for the *Ars moriendi*, emphasizes the *process* of poetry. In other words, to talk about poetry as such and leave visible the seams of its construction is to suggest that the process is more important than the final product and that *Leaves of Grass* is a living document. A successful *Ars moriendi* coaches readers through dying and not simply death. Whitman’s book illumines death as an art and subsequently a process. Another name for the proper respect of death as a process is *ritual*. Ritual involves supplication to the world beyond this one, to the source of Emersonian forces or to the spiritual place Whitman only calls “Somewhere.”³⁰ The reintroduction of ritual in American cultures of death and dying will help us revive the Good Death. In *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community*, Malidoma Patrice Somé prefigures our contemporary cultural crisis surrounding mortality: “The abandonment of ritual can be devastating. From the spiritual viewpoint, ritual is inevitable and necessary if one is to live... Where ritual is absent, the young ones are restless or violent, there are no real elders, and the grown-ups are bewildered. The future is dim.”³¹ Herein, he predicts our present catalogued

²⁸ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 278.

²⁹ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 639.

³⁰ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 627.

³¹ Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community* (Penguin Compass, 1993), 12.

by death activists like Caitlin Doughty—the one in which death and dying are cloistered away from daily life and in which strangers take exclusive care of our dead.

Americans need to re-ritualize both their lives and their deaths and divorce themselves from the corroded form of secularism that is only death anxiety reinforced and institutionally protected. *Leaves of Grass* provides the model for this activity and records Walt Whitman's long and devoted ritual immersion in his mortality. To die a Good Death is to prepare by doing it many times symbolically or spiritually. It is to engage with one's death every day of one's life and requires both repetition and patience. While each ritual experience is distinct, certain structures stay the same in any invocation. Malidoma Patrice Somé explains that one of these pillars of ritual is repetitiveness: "The actions (structures) in ritual are the same. When you pour a libation, the pouring stays the same."³² Repetitiveness, in turn, requires patience. This is why Somé claims: "*Ritual is not compatible with the rapid rhythm that industrialism has injected into life.*"³³ Walt Whitman's annexes are a crash course in patience. For example, an apple orchard is mentioned in the first line of "Out of May's Shows Selected." Yet, no fruit is borne until the end of the following poem, "Halcyon Days," when "...the apple at last hangs really finish'd and indolent-ripe in the tree."³⁴ One must wait.

Two key elements of ritual, outlined by Somé, operate in poems like "Queries to My Seventieth Year" and "Fancies at Navesink." These elements are repetitiveness (and its requisite need for patience) and dialogue.³⁵ In full, "Queries to My Seventieth Year" seeks:

Approaching, nearing, curious,

Thou dim, uncertain spectre— bringest thou life or death?

³² Somé, *Ritual*, 68.

³³ Somé, *Ritual*, 19.

³⁴ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 617.

³⁵ Somé, *Ritual*, 68.

Strength, weakness, blindness, more paralysis and heavier?

Or placid skies and sun? Wilt stir the waters yet?

Or haply cut me short for good? Or leave me here as now,

Dull, parrot-like and old, with crack'd voice harping, screeching?"³⁶

Here, Whitman converses with his individual mortality, visiting particulars like the infirmities caused by his series of paralytic strokes since 1873. In the *YOU TIDES WITH CEASELESS SWELL* section of "Fancies at Navesink," Whitman repeats these queries, reaching for the significance of human experience and mortality more broadly. The poet wonders: "What are the messages by you from distant stars to us? what Sirius'? what Capella's? / What central heart—and you the pulse—vivifies all? what boundless aggregate of all? / what subtle indirection and significance in you? what clue to all in you? what fluid, vast identity, Holding the universe with all its parts as one—as sailing in a ship?"³⁷ Of course, these questions cannot be answered, just as Whitman can never specify where his Somewhere, or the life after this one, is or what it looks like. What is important is the open-minded, internal dialogue Whitman has with his mortality or the practice of asking and thereby facing (rather than repressing) these essential, existential questions.

Death doula Alua Arthur remembers a client who was struggling with such queries. When Arthur arrived for their first session, Leslie, a sixty-seven-year-old suffering through late-stage lung disease, barraged her with weighty questions. Leslie wanted to know: what does dying feel like? What happens after we die? Is dying painful? Can we communicate with our loved ones after we die? Of course, Arthur did not know. She offered numerous insights, tools, and strategies from her death doula kit, but Leslie was uninterested. She wanted experienced answers—

³⁶ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 615.

³⁷ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 618.

concrete and verifiable. In the face of her client's mounting frustration, Arthur nearly faltered, wondering if a priest or spiritual advisor would be a better fit for Leslie at the end of her life. But then she rallied, realizing:

The real work we are doing together emerges. Leslie is grappling with the great unknowns of death and the surrender it requires. For most of her questions, there is simply no adequate answer... I assure Leslie that she is asking all of the right questions and doing all of the hard work. Reminding her that the questions she asks are ones that no earthly person can answer, I encourage her to stay immersed in the questions. Some do not require an answer. Some have no answer at all. This is the hard part of dying. It is also the hard part of living. How can we stay present with today not knowing if there is a tomorrow... When we open ourselves up to the discomfort of not knowing, that's where all the juice lies... The unknown is precisely what makes us human.³⁸

In difficult, probing poems like "Queries to My Seventieth Year," Walt Whitman demonstrates how to stay immersed in these questions. The larger *Leaves of Grass* is a testament to the effectiveness of this practice; with the Deathbed edition in his hands shortly before his death, Whitman was finally satisfied. We might recall his *New York Herald* announcement of the fact:

Walt Whitman wishes respectfully to notify the public that the book *Leaves of Grass*, which he has been working on at great intervals and partially issued for the past thirty-five or forty years, is now completed, so to call it, and he would like this new 1892 edition to absolutely supersede all previous ones. Faulty as it is, he decides it as by far his special and entire self-chosen poetic utterance.³⁹

³⁸ Arthur, *briefly perfectly human*, 225-231.

³⁹ Qtd. by Justin Kaplan in *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 51.

While Whitman was conversing with his mortality in his late poetry, he was also overseeing the construction of his burial site in Camden's Harleigh Cemetery. Whitman designed the annexes and his final resting place simultaneously. In September of 1890, he wrote to John H. Johnston, confirming: "I am writing a little annex (the 2d) to L of G. & giving out the design of my burial vault."⁴⁰ Whitman visited his vault, inspired by one of William Blake's plates, frequently throughout its construction. He even nicknamed it "Beth."⁴¹ These mortuary visits would likely strike contemporary Americans as macabre, but in Whitman's America, they were normal and in fact culturally representative. Scholar Maire Mullins explains: "In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, visits to cemetery grounds were not unusual, even if one were not visiting deceased family members. Because of the rural and park lawn cemetery movements of the 1820s, 1830s, 1840s, cemeteries were considered havens of greenery, and preceded the development of municipal parks. The frequency of Whitman's visits to Harleigh Cemetery may also be understood, then, as part of a wider shift in cultural attitudes toward cemeteries."⁴² Cemetery visits allowed cathartic escape from urbanity and enabled citizens to reconnect with nature—of which death is a vital part. Our distant location and avoidance of cemeteries in the twenty-first century has eroded this vital connection. Walt Whitman's active involvement in the disposition of his final remains is a healthful lesson to modernity.

The literal construction of Whitman's tomb and his eventual burial were collaborative affairs in which Whitman himself took part. But the poet also ritually buried himself in the pages of *Leaves of Grass*, leaving behind instructions for us with which we might return to a cultural homeostasis. As I mentioned in the preceding chapter, *Leaves of Grass* is a graveyard full of

⁴⁰ Qtd. by Maire Mullins, "'Building the House That Serves Him Longer': A History of Walt Whitman's Tomb" (*Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 41, no. 1/2 (2024): 1-34), 13.

⁴¹ Mullins, "'Building the House,'" 29.

⁴² Mullins, "'Building the House,'" 6.

tombs and epitaphs. With his *Ars moriendi*, Whitman is a witness: grieving and dying are not solitary pursuits. They require community—the company of both the living and the dead. But the processes of grieving and dying are presently denied this need in the U.S. Anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz assesses “...what is certainly the United States’ most painfully chronic ailment [is] its denial of death... and its abandonment of the bereaved to a kind of solitary confinement.”⁴³ Alua Arthur is similarly concerned, pointing out that dying people are already “outsiders”—somewhere in between life and death.⁴⁴ The psychological effects of further, culturally entrenched isolation can hardly be overstated and were surveyed at the start of this chapter. Malidoma Patrice Somè explains: “This is why mourners should never be left alone in expressing their grief. The vulnerable state of a mourner predicates him or her to sudden death, grief being an expression of the pull toward death and eternity.”⁴⁵ Somè, a member of the tribe, also details Dagara funeral rites—which feature not only the affected mourners but “containers—” individuals who are part of the grieving community but further removed than the mourners and therefore capable of keeping watch over and care of the most vulnerable participants during the ceremonies. Death doula Alua Arthur plays the essential part of the container for her contemporary clients in the twenty-first century United States. But what of citizens without access to her or other death doulas’ services? What about those who do not know that death doulas exist or who could not afford to hire one? Walt Whitman, through his *Ars moriendi*, might be their container or death doula.

In the twilight poetry, Whitman constructs a great number of burial vaults and hosts the requisite funeral rites. His interest in poetically staging specific memorial acts for named

⁴³ Qtd. by Doughty, *From Here to Eternity*, 102.

⁴⁴ Arthur, *briefly perfectly human*, 99.

⁴⁵ Somè, *Ritual*, 81.

individuals began in earnest in the *Songs of Parting* cluster. For the 1881 edition thereof, Whitman penned elegies for his mother (“As at Thy Portals Also Death”) and assassinated Chief of State James Garfield (“The Sobbing of the Bells”). This memorial habit dominates the appendices *Sands at Seventy* and *Good-Bye My Fancy* and helps us understand the purpose of all the details, dates, and annotations associated with Whitman’s late style. Very early on in *Sands at Seventy*, Whitman offers “The Wallabout Martyrs.” The elegy, with its lengthy, italicized headnote, reads in full:

[In Brooklyn, in an old vault, mark’d by no special recognition, lie huddled at this moment the undoubtedly authentic remains of the staunchest and earliest revolutionary patriots from the British prison ships and prisons of the times of 1776-83, in and around New York, and from all over Long Island; originally buried—many thousands of them— in trenches in the Wallabout sands.]

Greater than the memory of Achilles or Ulysses,
 More, more by far to thee than tomb of Alexander,
 Those cart loads of old charnel ashes, scales and splints of mouldy bones,
 Once living men— once resolute courage, aspiration, strength,
 The stepping stones to thee to-day and here, America.”⁴⁶

Here, as in so much of his Civil War poetry for the unknown dead, Whitman finally grants these veterans their special recognition. Most importantly for the *Ars moriendi*, he also emphasizes their deaths as processes ongoing rather than experiences completed. Whitman insists, rather literally in this instance, that the earthly remains of the Wallabout Martyrs are “stepping stones” into the future. Whitman’s tribute to Ulysses S. Grant has a similar emphasis. In “Death of

⁴⁶ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 615.

General Grant” of *Sands at Seventy*, the action is rooted in the present. The poet laments: “As one by one *withdraw* the lofty actors, / From that great play on history’s stage eterne... / in countless graves *receding*... / Victor’s and vanquish’d—Lincoln and Lee’s— *now* thou with them.”⁴⁷ Death is a process and very much a part of, indeed fuel for, everyday life, Whitman’s *Ars moriendi* affirms.

“Red Jacket (from Aloft)” follows on the heels of “Death of General Grant” and relates a spectral haunting over the new Buffalo City monument to the Iroquois speaker. Whitman takes his cue from the phenomenon, and in the next poem, he dismisses the commissioned, marble monument to George Washington. Instead, Whitman claims that the general’s “true monument” is “Wherever sails a ship, or house is built on land, or day or night... / Wherever [there is] Freedom, pois’d by Toleration, sway’d by Law.”⁴⁸ In other words, Whitman confirms that ongoing activity, life informed or infused by the spirit of the departed, is the most appropriate and cathartic expression of grief. His *Ars moriendi* teaches that death requires ritual acknowledgement, but that that ritual must be renewed and not simply a singular occasion set in stone.

‘Embalming with love’ the deaths of so many— and the death of himself— in the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* gave Whitman quotidian purpose in his final years.⁴⁹ Like many modern Americans, Walt Whitman experienced a “forced confinement” toward the end of his life as his health declined and his symptoms from recurrent paralytic strokes worsened.⁵⁰ Yet, he continued to sing, releasing his “small old age collation[s]” and completing his *Ars moriendi*.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 622, emphasis mine.

⁴⁸ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 623.

⁴⁹ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 647.

⁵⁰ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 637.

⁵¹ Ibid.

What is more: Whitman published many of these twilight poems in periodicals before placing them in his *magnum opus*. Terminally ill and often confined, Walt Whitman was not waiting to die but actively dying. This difference is essential. By participating in his death as he did his life, Whitman avoided being overwhelmed by the isolation, loneliness, and depression that so often come with extreme old age or illness in the United States. His example is indispensable to twenty-first-century Americans, especially those who are in or who will face relocation into a nursing home or assisted living facility.

Steadfast in the production of his book, in his purpose, Whitman testifies that joy has a place in aging and even dying. In the preface to *Good-Bye My Fancy*, he teases:

(Reader, you must allow a little fun here— for one reason there are too many of the following poemets about death, &c., and for another the passing hours (July 5, 1890) are so sunny-fine. And old as I am I feel to-day almost a part of some frolicsome wave, or for sporting yet like a kid or kitten— probably a streak of physical adjustment and perfection here and now. I believe I have it in me perennially anyhow.)⁵²

In this lengthy preface to the second annex, Whitman sounds much like Michel de Montaigne, whose twenty-first-century acolyte Leon Kass was a bioethics advisor to President George W. Bush. Famously, Montaigne wondered: “Inasmuch as I no longer cling so hard to the good things of life when I begin to lose the use and pleasure of them, I come to view death with much less frightened eyes... When we are led by Nature’s hand down a gentle and virtually imperceptible slope, bit by bit, one step at a time, she rolls us into this wretched state and makes us familiar with it.”⁵³ And in his preface, Whitman does not lie about the costs, pangs and pains of old age.

⁵² Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 638. This glad phenomenon, while certainly due in part to Whitman’s personality and purpose, may also have to do with the documented experience of a “terminal rally” in hospice patients.

⁵³ Qtd. by Dhruv Khullar, “How to Die in Good Health” (*The New Yorker*, April 15, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/04/22/how-to-die-in-good-health>).

He writes about the dimming of his eyes and the failures of his mind. He describes his body “...much like some hard-cased dilapidated grim ancient shell-fish or time-bang’d conch (no legs, utterly non-locomotive) cast up high and dry on the shore-sands, helpless to move anywhere.”⁵⁴ But this honest description comes just before he describes his joyous spells and likens himself to kids and kittens. Whitman is a witness to both the devastations and the gifts of being mortal.

And when Whitman seeks relief, he finds it. Bowed “To the Sun-set Breeze,” Whitman’s aging body is electrified anew:

Ah, whispering, something again, unseen,
Where late this heated day thou enterest at my window, door,
Thou, laving, tempering all, cool-freshing, gently vitalizing
Me, old, alone, sick, weak-down, melted-worn with sweat...
Thou, messenger-magical strange bringer to body and spirit of me,
(Distances balk’d— occult medicines penetrating me from head to foot).⁵⁵

Walt Whitman attributed his old-age stores of joy and vitality and his ability to recognize death as a project to his genetics. Of course, in doing so, he raises a key point. We mortals cannot control how we die. Many of us do not receive so many years as Whitman or such advance notice of the date of our departure. But the *Ars moriendi* is not age restrictive. While obviously if not especially relevant to elderly or terminally ill people, the genre, and particularly Whitman’s example, welcomes readers of all ages and stages. To engage with our deaths, as early as possible, is to enrich our lives with perspective and inform our notions of purpose. It also empowers humans against chance and catastrophe. Whitman considers these inevitabilities at length in *Drum-Taps* and *Memoranda*, and he revisits them in old age. In *Good-Bye My Fancy*’s

⁵⁴ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 638.

⁵⁵ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 645.

“A Voice from Death,” penned in honor of the victims of “(The Johnstown, Penn., cataclysm, May 31, 1889.),” the poet records:

A voice from Death, solemn and strange, in all his sweep and power,
 With sudden, indescribable blow— towns drown’d— humanity by thousands slain,
 The vaunted work of thrift, goods, dwellings, forge, street, iron bridge,
 Dash’d pell-mell by the blow— yet usher’d life continuing on,
 (Amid the rest, amid the rushing, whirling, wild debris,
 A suffering woman saved— a baby safely born!)⁵⁶

The earliest edition of *Leaves of Grass* assures that life always emerges from death and that the relationship between the two is symbiotic. But it is the Deathbed edition of *Leaves* that healthfully acknowledges the existence of primordial forces that permeate the globe and might make baubles of human lives—chance and catastrophe. And with this edition, Whitman also offers strength in the face of these phenomena by demonstrating the early part we might take in shaping our ends. With his own recorded ritual engagement with his death and burial, Whitman invites us to imaginatively and/or spiritually participate in our own deaths every day of our lives. If we do so, the *Ars moriendi* promises, we might meet a Good Death after all.

MEET THE MYSTERY AND JUST SAY “DIE”

Modern medical teams understandably have a difficult time discussing death with their patients. Even death-positive advocate Atul Gawande remembers experiencing this discomfort as a young surgeon. What is dangerous is the reinforcement of this natural disquiet. Such fortification occurs daily in the United States where another medical intervention is almost always possible. American doctors do not have to get candid about death— they can almost

⁵⁶ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 649.

always suggest another treatment or stopgap, and that is exactly what their medical training encourages them to do. This practice has resulted in so many unprepared, especially unpleasant, urgent exits. It is why so many Americans die on ventilators and in intensive care units, experiencing debilitating symptoms associated with the medical interventions themselves. It is why so many loved ones leave a hospital feeling cheated when death was always guaranteed. This is what happened to Sara Monopoli and her family.

A young woman and new mother, Sara was diagnosed with incurable lung cancer. Early on, she expressed her desire to die at home, peacefully. Thereafter, the subject of her death was abandoned and avoided at all costs. Sara was determined to fight and win. She endured round after round of ineffective chemotherapy and eventually pinned all of her hopes on an experimental, Phase I Pfizer drug. Even after the discovery of a second, unrelated thyroid cancer and her disqualification from the Pfizer trial when her lung cancer metastasized to both hemispheres of her brain, Sara's mind was not on her death. Although he knew how her story would likely end, Sara's oncologist indulged her fantasies about long-term survival and himself got swept up in a tide of hopes and miracles. Sara's oncologist did not push her or her family to consider the serious proximity of her death. Atul Gawande, called in for a consult on the operable thyroid cancer, remembers how he too failed to have a candid conversation with Sara about her approaching death. She seemed so determined, so optimistic about quantity that all opportunities to seize quality of life were forfeit. Opted into every possible radiation and chemotherapy treatment, Sara's body was exhausted. Finally, she contracted pneumonia, and she died on a ventilator in an ICU—which was never what she wanted. Sara's husband, Rich, remembers: "We had a baby. We were young. And this was so shocking and so odd. We never discussed stopping treatment." And Gawande laments:

This is a modern tragedy, replayed millions of times over. When there is no way of knowing exactly how long our skeins will run—when we imagine ourselves to have much more time than we do—our every impulse is to fight, to die with chemo in our veins or a tube in our throat or fresh sutures in our flesh. The fact that we may be shortening or worsening the time we have left hardly seems to register. We imagine that we can wait until the doctors tell us that there is nothing more they can do. But rarely is there nothing more that doctors can do.⁵⁷

So much agony—both physical and psychic—might be avoided.

Alua Arthur likewise recalls a personal encounter with our death-anxious culture in which a natural reticence was allowed to corrode into repression. Her beloved brother-in-law Peter was dying and suffering greatly through late-stage cancer. She remembers: “Palliative care doctors floated in cautiously to check on him. There was apology in their movements and voices, without uttering one. It was clear what was happening, yet no one dared to say the words, to name this confusing, liminal state.”⁵⁸ Arthur recognized the relief latent in naming one’s experience. She understood that any positive action must begin with acceptance through acknowledgement, and so, she became a death doula in order to help others whose doctors have only apology in their movements. Walt Whitman’s Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* is a more accessible death doula or *Ars moriendi* and reminds us that the liminal state in which Peter and his beloveds sat is the site of ritual and spiritual opportunity.

Arthur and Whitman both attest that the first step toward a Good Death is the acknowledgement of death itself in all its inevitability and its relentless mystery. The poet clearly bows to the mystery of death in poems like “Mirages,” in the very late trinity “The

⁵⁷ Gawande, *Being Mortal*, 165-173.

⁵⁸ Arthur, *briefly perfectly human*, 53.

Unexpress'd," "Grand Is the Seen," and "Unseen Buds," and in footnotes, like the second attached to "An Ended Day" in which he recalls:

'He went out with the tide and the sunset,' was a phrase I heard from a surgeon describing an old sailor's death under peculiarly gentle conditions. During the Secession War, 1863 and '4, visiting the Army Hospitals around Washington, I form'd the habit, and continued it to the end, whenever the ebb or flood tide began the latter part of day, of punctually visiting those at that time populous wards of suffering men. Somehow (or I thought so) the effect of the hour was palpable. The badly wounded would get some ease, and would like to talk a little, or be talk'd to. Intellectual and emotional natures would be at their best: Deaths were always easier; medicines seem'd to have better effect when given then, and a lulling atmosphere would pervade the wards. Similar influences, similar circumstances and hours, day-close, after great battles, even with all their horrors. I had more than once the same experience on the fields cover'd with fallen or dead.⁵⁹

Here, we see Whitman meditate on the possibility of improving or influencing the experience of death while also acknowledging its essential enigma by capitalizing the word and qualifying his assessments in a parenthetical aside.⁶⁰ In "Shakespere-Bacon's Cipher" Whitman boldly affirms the value of the unsolved mystery kept nigh to the human heart: "I doubt it not... / In each old song bequeath'd... / something unreck'd before— some unsuspected author... / In every object, mountain, tree, and star— in every birth and life... / A mystic cipher waits unfolded."⁶¹ Clearly, if allowed, mystery can inspire.

⁵⁹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 642.

⁶⁰ In just two lines of "L. of G.'s Purport," we see Whitman vary on his capitalization of death: "I sing of life, yet mind me well of death: / To-day shadowy Death dogs my steps, my seated shape, and has for years— / Draws sometimes close to me, as face to face" (643). This inconsistency is itself a homage to, and indeed appropriate representation of, the mystery of death.

⁶¹ Whitman, *Deathbed LoG*, 643.

Vitally for the *Ars moriendi*, respecting the mystery of death not only requires a certain level of quiet acceptance and awe but it also means not foreclosing on the possibility of life after/in/through death. Walt Whitman presents and preserves this horizon of hope necessary for the *Ars moriendi*'s achievement. In a footnote to the first of two title poems in *Good-Bye My Fancy*, he calls this horizon the *sine qua non*, claiming: "Behind a Good-bye there lurks much of the salutation of another beginning— to me, Development, Continuity, Immortality, Transformation, are the chiefest life-meanings of Nature and Humanity, and are the *sine qua non* of all facts, and each fact."⁶² And when it comes to the prospect of an afterlife, Whitman offers a number of options in *Leaves of Grass*. Although never overtly or specifically religious, the poet portrays a parent-like deity and requisite ideas about that sort of heaven in poems like "My 71st Year." Whitman also presents posterity-centered ideas about immortality. Perhaps most poignantly, he considers the way that his book will allow him to live after his death: "(You distant, dim unknown—or young or old—countless, unspecified, readers belov'd, / We never met, and ne'er shall meet— and yet our souls embrace, long, close and long."⁶³ But a tangible heaven and artistic creations are not the only visions of immortality in the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*. There are versions thereof palatable even to materialists in poems like "This Compost" and "Twilight."

In pieces like "Now Precedent Songs, Farewell" and "The Dead Tenor" in particular, there is a reach for immortality through one's projects or poetry, but there is doubt about the possibility of perseverance. Importantly, the plant proffered in the face of loss is not a sprig of lilac, "wreaths of roses [or] branches of palm," but an autumn leaf, already fading and quickly buried

⁶² Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 639.

⁶³ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 629.

in the closing grave.⁶⁴ But still this is a basic, materialist surviving. As in “The Calming Thought of All,” Whitman offers solace in the form of simple molecular endurance. The provision of such myriad forms of faith in the Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* is important because it renders the book that much more accessible—to all Americans, “those of all nations at any time upon the earth.”⁶⁵ In “Continuities” and “Going Somewhere,” Whitman reaches the same conclusion about the inevitability of immortality though he converses with German spiritualism and English empiricism in the respective poems. The maintenance of this horizon of hope, in many ways “a hope not hopeless but unhopeful,” for its specifics are not guaranteed, finally achieves an *Ars moriendi* of *Leaves of Grass*.⁶⁶

And America has never needed it more. In 2010, Massachusetts General Hospital conducted a study in which half of a group of stage-IV lung cancer patients proceeded with the standard oncology regimen while the other half saw both palliative care specialists and oncologists: “The result: those who saw a palliative care specialist stopped chemotherapy sooner, entered hospice far earlier, experienced less suffering at the end of their lives—and they lived 25 percent longer... If end-of-life discussions were an experimental drug, the FDA would approve it.”⁶⁷ Whitman provides the cornerstone upon which end-of-life discussions might stand. The Deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* is a stunning example of *Ars moriendi*, and it is the Rosetta Stone for understanding the relationship between medicine and the humanities in the country Whitman loved so much.

⁶⁴ Whitman, Deathbed *LoG*, 625, 631.

⁶⁵ Walt Whitman, Preface to 1855 *Leaves of Grass* (1855, reprinted *The Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, edited by Justin Kaplan, 5-26, New York, NY: The Library of America, 1982), 5.

⁶⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903, reprinted with “The Talented Tenth” and “The Souls of White Folk,” an introduction by Ibram X. Kendi, and notes by Monica M. Elbert, Penguin Books, 2021), 156.

⁶⁷ Gawande, 177-178.

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