

Every Atom: Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"

CLASS ELEVEN • Video Transcript

>>>Ed, in previous sessions we have touched on Whitman's use of the catalogue, we know that he's drawing on a long tradition beginning with Homer's Catalogue the Ships. Today we might look at it in a little bit more detail.

ED: Yeah it's interesting isn't it? I mean, for this session we've been reading in the later part of the poems, sections 47 through 49, and by the time we get this far into the poem, we're so used to Whitman's catalogs that we almost don't even notice when they're there. In Section 47 for instance, we get a kind of last little catalog, "the young mechanic is closest to me knows me well the woodman that takes his axe and jug with him shall take me with him all day the farm boy ploughing in the field feels good at the sound of my voice" and it goes on with again in that form that we've now internalized and just really gotten used to one line, one image, one line, one image.

CHRIS: One breath.

ED: One breath, yeah. It's as Whitman has that image of my head sluing around my neck you know it's as if those catalogs or the head just moving and whatever the eyes and the ears pick up becomes a line in the poem so as we come toward the end of the poem we think back on those how strange those catalogs felt Section 15 where we got our first extended catalog and then Section 33 where it goes on for pages and pages the longest section of the poem and I love thinking about how early readers responded so many of the early reviews of Leaves of Grass complained about Whitman's poetry sounding like an auctioneer's catalog you know that Whitman was some auctioneer just auctioning off the world because it was one item after another after another, and it gives you the sense that up to that point there really had been nothing quite like it in American poetry we have the Homeric catalogs obviously we've got biblical catalogs but this kind of catalog of the commonplace this catalog of just things that you see around you there had never been so anything quite like it before.

CHRIS: So how do we read these catalogs - how does Whitman want us to read these catalogs?

ED: That's a great question. Whitman came to call them 'catalogs' himself picking up on the early criticism and the reviews. Yeah picking up those early reviews just saying okay people wanna call them my catalogs I'll call them my catalogs that's fine with me but we really don't know how Whitman himself would have wanted us to read them I've noticed over the years that my students will very often say when they come to the catalog sections 15 and 33 in the poem they slow down more than at any other point in "Song of Myself," that it makes them really slow down and savor image by image but I've had other students who will say this is when I really speed up I just start skimming through the catalogs because you kinda get the point and you can just kind of move through them you can read them as if you're on a train and the train's moving quickly and through the window you're seeing sort of flashes of continually different scenes or you can read them the way I think William Carlos Williams would have taught us to read them Williams when he read Whitman's catalogs said well Whitman's problem was that he didn't see the number of poems that he had in that one poem for William's it would be let's slow this catalog down and turn each one



into a poem, I think of that Williams triadic line and you know if we take the famous “Red Wheelbarrow” poem and take the opening that “so much depends upon” and put that in front every line of a Whitman catalog you begin to get the sense of how Williams would say everything in the world obviously depends upon this one thing that is in our sight in our hearing at that particular moment. That’s what life depends on.

CHRIS: So it is as if Whitman is laying out a grid for all future poets in which they will work; here’s one way to take a look at the world take each one of those lines and turn it into a poem and you become William Carlos Williams.

ED: That’s right, that’s right. Ezra Pound sang about Whitman that he broke the new wood and now was the time for carving, right? That there was a kind of brute democratic power to what Whitman did to in these catalogs, just pull together a sort of representative randomness of the world and make it appear as poetry and then what the Modernist needed to do, Pound said was begin to work with the things he chopped down and turn them into the true sculptures.

CHRIS: It also touches on issues that we’ve addressed earlier in earlier sessions about his love for photography, doesn’t it? The way that the photograph can give you every part of the landscape, all the debris, all the clutter, everything that makes up this world of ours.

ED: Absolutely. And you really do get the sense of the catalogs more than anywhere else of that poetic page as a kind of open photographic plate on which anything can take its place and so you get on those pages of catalogs a wild sense of randomness, and the power is in that randomness. It appears random to us, but of course Whitman was continually working and working to get the lines in the order that for whatever reason he felt worked best.

CHRIS: Do you have a sense of what that ordering process might have been for him?

ED: I don’t really have a sense of it. I think in Section 33 and Section 15 there are recurring motifs, recurring images so that you’ll get musical sounds for instance...

CHRIS: It comes back in a refrain-like manner.

ED: Yeah it’s just there’ll be a jingle of change, you know and then there’ll be a whistle of a train and so you’ll get a sense that it’s not mathematical by any means but a sense that every once in a while, there needs to be a sound to make the world feel properly represented these catalogs. Every once in a while, there needs to be a young woman. Every once in a while there needs to be a young man. Every once in a while there needs to be a rural scene; there needs to be an urban scene. So I think Whitman is, at some level, in these catalogs looking for how the randomness the apparent randomness of the representation still has to be representative so he’s looking to make sure there’s the proper balance of the elements I’m always struck as I read the catalogs with the way that Whitman creates for himself a new pattern of hearing and thinking his way through poetry...

CHRIS: What do you mean by that?

ED: Well he gives up right margin rhyme, for instance, very few Whitman poems in Leaves of Grass have right margin rhyme. Occasionally they do... “O Captain My Captain” famously but in Whitman when there’s right margin rhyme when two lines rhyme at the right margin it draws attention to itself because of its rarity rather than in poets who normally rhyme lines draw attention to themselves

when the rhyme fails in Whitman it's when the rhyme hits that our attention is drawn to it in the catalogs and in so much of his other poetry he rhymes really at the left-hand margin and he rhymes by anaphora by the repetition of the same word so that we sort of soar out through the line and then we always come back to a sound that we're familiar with at the beginning of the line that immediately is already taking us out again into the world into another part of the world we didn't expect to go to.

CHRIS: And with the repetition of that sound at the beginning of the line the line can extend for however long the poet wants and in that surging rhythm we find the variation that is at the heart of poetry.

ED: That's right.

CHRIS: We have a regular anaphora and then the surge.

ED: That's right so that we're continually moving out and instead of the resting at the at the end of the perception we come to just this tiny moment's rest at the beginning of the next perception we're already there so it's a style that keeps the reader moving never at rest always moving the moment of rest is the moment already of moving again into the next line and those repetitions so often in the catalogs are the definite articles the "the"s and I always think about how different Whitman's catalogs would feel if you use the indefinite article if you used an "a" instead of a "the" because the "the" allows for a specificity of this particular image it's "the hunter" right but "the" is also generic it's the hunter so we get a specific hunter as well as the generic hunter in the catalog and in the catalog as we move through that wild diversity of imagery we're seeing specific things all the time but we're also seeing the way the world is all over the world there's a hunter hunting right now.

CHRIS: And it brings to mind one of Whitman's great descendants Wallace Stevens who concludes his marvelous poem "The Man on the Dump" with that line "Where was it one first heart of the truth" the definite article and it seems like a perfect Whitmanic line isn't it?

ED: It does indeed.