

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

CLASS FOUR • Video Transcript

>>>So the reading for today, Chris, takes us into so many passages in "Song of Myself" that make me, at least, really start to think about Whitman's conceptions of democracy and the democratic "I" is going to come to be. I love the end of section 14 where he says "What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me, Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns, Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me, Not asking the sky to come down to my good will, Scattering it freely forever." There's the definition of the "me" for Whitman. "What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me." It's not a me that is looking to rise from the hierarchy it's a me that's looking to expand itself by reaching out to everything around it, to enrich itself with those things. And I think of a passage in Whitman's notebooks in which, this is one of the places where you can see how he uses phrases and just pulls them out and makes them part of the poetry, but he says "Good brains ancient and modern agree that what is nearest and commonest is always last to be realized. For instance, within the infinite wells of meaning, spiritual and material, lying beneath our census tables - within the 40,000,000 aggregate which is about the total population of the U.S. today - behind the tremendous fact of our grown citizens with their social, political and business relations, involving every question of life and death - lies folded a fat still more tremendous - the fact of the young. As I speak, there are now existing in these States coming forward at the rate of over a million fresh recruits annually, an army, leaving out infants and grown persons of 15,000,000, counting both sexes from five to twenty years of age, inclusive. Think what this splendid mass of ductile humanity, each for his or own sake, under a schooling worthy of our time, were eligible to become." And there you get that sense, not just of every individual expanding into something larger, more diverse, more democratic than it was before, but thinking of the aggregate of the population coming forward and in that evolution of youth, within a generation, a much more democratic culture is going to result.

CHRIS: And for that democratic culture will be the democratic imagination, which is the subject of our next unit.

Whitman creates an "I" and a "you" character, and in the relationship between these two characters, a discourse that travels back and forth between them and across the ages, we begin to see the very nature of the democratic process which is at the heart of this poem.

ED: Yeah, it's as we talked about earlier, the poem seems to me to be an attempt by Whitman to voice a democratic "I" what this truly democratic "I" would be. America was setting out to be the first true democracy and in Whitman's mind this had something to do with politics but not primarily to do with politics. Democracy was going to require a complete refurbishment of every aspect of life. We're going to have to think differently, we're going to have to identify what the self is differently, we're going to have to think about religion differently, think about philosophy, everything was going to be altered by this. What would a democratic military look like, a military that broke down hierarchy? Whitman would work with, think about these things and I think, in a way, at the heart of it, when we think of the opening of the poem, "I celebrate myself, and what I assume you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." I mean, there, ultimately is that first brief attempt to articulate a radical democratic voice. The two things that probably have

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generated virtually every war throughout history: we fight over property and we fight over beliefs. "What I assume you shall assume", "Every atom belonging to be as good belongs to you", in two lines Whitman obliterates the things that have divided, separated, and created anti-democratic feeling throughout history. But the atoms, that sense of "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" is part of what Whitman is really going to push through this poem in all kinds of ways - scientific ways, philosophical ways, that notion that "what I am", materially, "what I am", Whitman would say, "is a conglomeration of things that are in the moments and the months and years before I was born, if we track these atoms back, look where they went. And if we millions of years and billions of years" and ultimately it's the old sixties mantra "we are stardust." In Whitman's mind this is one of the great revelations that nineteenth century science is giving him. We are all the same atoms and we are never, actually when we talk about ourselves being a material body we have to recognize that that material body in fact is this continual process. Day in and day out it is shifting. We're not the same material thing today that we were yesterday or ten years ago or fifteen years ago. Our body has completely altered and changed.

CHRIS: And this is coming at a moment of democratic crisis. He's writing in the years running up to the civil war, and he sees all around him an evidence that democracy is breaking down. How does that shape the poem?

ED: Yeah, well democracy is breaking down, democracy is, I think probably in Whitman's mind, failing to form. Certainly the slavery issue was throwing this directly in the face of every thinking American at this point, you know we've built a country on the idea of the creation of all human beings as equal beings -

CHRIS: And yet Whitman - in the constitution is the fact that they are not.

ED: Right, they are not. Yeah, so Whitman recognizes early on that America itself is a process, and I always think when I hear of discussions of the supreme court and whether we've got any kind of evolutionist view of the constitution or originalist view of the constitution, Whitman would be definitely on the evolution side. That is we set a goal of all men are created equal and in setting that goal, even in the stating of it, we recognize that over time that phrase "all men" becomes problematic. Everything is continually in process, needs to be rethought, needs to have implicit hidden hierarchies revealed and broken down so that when we think of Song of Myself, I think part of what we experience as we read it is that it's a poem that, in its very structure, is continually breaking down and then putting itself back together. Whitman will generate one of those long catalogs where everything feels like it's coming apart and where's the self here that it pulls it all back together and then it breaks it down again, the continual process built right into the structure of the poem.

CHRIS: And in that way, the poem is teaching us not only how to be individuals, conscious of the past, the present and future, but how participating the body in politic to understand that in the surging forth and drawing back that energy, that dynamic is a part of who we are in a democracy.

ED: Yeah, who we are in a democracy and that that sense that, yeah, the body politic is every bit as much a material body as our own bodies are and every bit as much a spiritual body as our own bodies are and we use those terms spiritual and physical in Whitman, one of the great things Whitman accomplishes in this poem I think is to suggest how there's really no separation between

physical and spiritual. You know if we see the physical as it really is, Whitman would say, we're seeing continually, if we could somehow color the atoms of the world in a million different ways and just stand back and watch movement of atoms through the world for one minute we'd probably all go insane because everything would be shifting.

CHRIS: And everything is connected, every moment, we may think that we can divide ourselves but in fact we are all caught up in it.

ED: Sure. Scientists even have worked out the formulas that make it clear that we literally are breathing the atoms that composed in and some way Walt Whitman or Jesus Christ or any one name in history on any given day there's a one in three chance that we inhale one of the items that made up that particular body. Everything is continually shifting.

CHRIS: And his great insight is to have discovered that grand linkage that could be turned into a poem.

ED: A grand linkage that becomes in its ultimate realization true democracy. It becomes not a democratic form of government but it becomes a democratic way of living and understanding life. That everything around you that looks like it's the not in fact is really part of you.

CHRIS: And, it makes me then think that when he's looking to the future that "I" speaking to the "you" in future, he's understanding something also essential about democracy that it is not a static instruction, it is something that happens moment by moment as we always were.

ED: Right.

It all has to do in this poem and in Whitman's politics in his metaphysics. It's a place where the poetics on the metaphysics and the politics all seem to come together and process an idea that everything is process, the "I" is a process, the nation itself is a process, democracy is a process everything is continually altering and shifting and forming and reforming. And we sense that, I think, as we read Song of Myself that we have an "I" that is continually building itself up from things all around the world.

CHRIS: Accumulating them.

ED: Accumulating, absorbing, getting larger and larger until it feels as if the self is so large it has lost any sense of identity and has begun to diffuse into the world itself and then in Song of Myself we'll feel those moments where Whitman says "alright let me pause a moment here, am I large enough to contain all of this?" And the answer for Whitman always is "yes, I contain multitudes". That's the nature of the democratic self. It has to learn to be comfortable with contradiction, with continual struggle against a sense of a narrow discriminating self and give itself over to the wider, larger always increasing democratic self.

CHRIS: We could say even that the surging and epic flow that we have in the lines and from section to section patterns the very ways in which a democracy works: we move in one direction and then we contract, we make some progress, we make less progress that seems to be an essential tension to the poem isn't it?

ED: It is and it's that idea of an evolutionary force in nature, in human history: how can we urge that democratic evolution along because for Whitman it really is a kind of evolution from a feudalistic cast of mind to a democratic cast of mind and he would have to invent a poetry that would be as open and as non-discriminatory and as absorptive as he imagined an ideal democracy would be. It's why Whitman loved photography, photography gave us a new sense of democratic beauty, Whitman said, because a photographic field, a photographic plate was just open to the impressions the world whatever the Sun lit itself upon would show up in a photographic plate and so Whitman said we have to relearn what beauty is, beauty is not selecting out the aesthetically pleasing, beauty is fullness, completeness everything having its place and the photographic image, Whitman said, teaches us finally to see democratically anything that's there has its place in the picture.

CHRIS: And that includes even the threat to democracy, which he can feel building as he's writing the first draft of Song of Myself and which will come to fruition in the Civil War.

ED: Yes, and I think of something Whitman said right after the Civil War about democracy when he wrote his great essay on democracy called Democratic Vistas and he said "We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawakened, it's a great word whose history I suppose remains unwritten because that history has yet to be enacted" and that's really the key Whitman was under no illusion that he was living in a democracy he instead had the hope that he was living in something that would evolve into a democracy.

CHRIS: On its way to a democracy and it occurs to me that Civil War is also the first war that gets photographed in great measure and that record, a visual record the horror of war of the prisons of war becomes a part in who we are as a people and it seems to me he's created a poem that can take all of that kind of information in.

ED: Yes that's right and photography was at such a state during the Civil War that we literally have no photographic images of battles because battles couldn't be photographed.

CHRIS: It's after the fact.

ED: Right. Either the preparations for the battles or the after effects, the hospitals and so on and that becomes a record Whitman believed that photographic record of the war of why war is not the grand heroic thing that it had been portrayed before but rather the war amputations, the war of death and despair, we see the after affects, we see the farm fields of America covered with corpses.

CHRIS: The threat to democracy though, what does he do with that - over the course of the rest of his life in the revision of the poem?

ED: Well that's going to be the big challenge for Whitman. I think he actually goes through a period of about three or four years where he thinks Leaves of Grass, he thinks Song of Myself is a poem of the past, that it was a poem that was built on the idea that any self, as well as the nation itself was large enough and could contain contradictions and still remain unified, still remain whole, and that faith was shaken for Whitman and for the entire country obviously as it came apart at the seams and it was only after the war the Whitman really began to reconceive of the idea that now that we've been through what we've been through we can begin the process now of re-embodiment the idea that

contradictions, that differences in views, still can be part of a unified whole and it's something that I think we all see day by day we're still living with, you know it's kind of amazing but the talk of secession continues to this day and it's always that battle between whether there can be a conceived identity that is large enough to hold opposing views and still say this is America, this is a self, and it's Whitman's great faith.