A Rhetoric for Polytheistic Democracy: 
Walt Whitman’s “Poem of Many in One”

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This essay aims to generate rhetorically oriented normative communication theory useful for the current socio-intellectual moment. It draws upon Walt Whitman’s 1850s poetry as an artistically compelling statement of what I call polytheistic democracy, a form of life marked by three overlapping ideals: pluralistic tolerance for multiple gods and moral orientations; commitment to recognizing, preserving, and artfully representing sociocultural variety; and receptivity to contact with a diverse range of particular others. Whitman offers theory in the sense of a structured way of seeing. It is normative in that it describes a world that might be, not one that is, and provides orienting visions, regulative ideals, and topoi of praise and criticism that stand available to guide the communicative practices of individuals, groups, and institutions alike.

The theory is “rhetorically oriented” in that it draws upon techniques and vocabularies developed within the rhetorical tradition. Methodologically, it is generated through rhetorical criticism and imitatio. I offer a reading that brings out the rhetorical dynamics of Whitman’s vision of polytheistic democracy as articulated in his 1856 “Poem of Many in One” (later and canonically titled “By Blue Ontario’s Shore”), a central social statement in his much-revised masterwork, Leaves of Grass. In so doing, I hold Whitman up as a model for imitatio, the complex interpretive practice whereby, in Michael Leff’s words, historical texts come to serve “as equipment for future rhetorical production” (1997, 201). Imitatio is an intellectually generative process. “As the embodied utterances of the past are interpreted for current application, their ideas and modes of articulation are reembodied, and old voices are recovered for use in new circumstances” (203).

I couple imitatio with a neo-pragmatist rhetorical criticism oriented toward practice and reflection in the current cultural moment. Whitman gains significance insofar as he helps us experience, think about, and act
within the worlds we now traverse. Among other qualities, those worlds are marked by heterogeneous groups and people who must continuously find ways to live with one another; by large institutions that stand as steady reminders that individuals may not matter very much; by ubiquitous electronic and print media offering copious streams of symbolic culture; and by countervailing geographical forces of circulation and social segmentation of fleshly bodies in the material spaces of public life. In worlds with such qualities, Whitman is a useful locus of imitatio—someone whose cosmopolitan social imagination, deep pluralism, wide-ranging habits of contact, and attention to corporeal individuals all serve as useful equipment for new rhetorical and moral production.

“Poem of Many in One” has a self-exemplifying aspect to it, for it models what it aims to cultivate in the world. Whitman’s print-based rhetoric provides an overarching vision of polytheistic democracy and mass community, scattered across time and space and actualized partly through individuals. His discourse models this social condition by displaying radical openness to high and low, sacred and profane, the admired and the socially despised. It is rhetorically driven by a copious style and an aesthetically oriented democratic ethos that Whitman’s mediated eloquence aims also to generate in its readers. Its success thus hinges on readerly receptivity and cultivated ethos that re-embodies aspects of his sensibility and rhetorical techniques, giving them new momentum in scattered realms of social being.

I amplify key components of Whitman’s normative vision not to trump competing moral principles and orientations but to supplement them. In this sense, my essay is pluralist all the way down. It is socially pluralist in that I believe in encouraging the development and preservation of multiple sets of normative orientations, with no single principle or moral perspective ordering all others. It is individually pluralist in that I understand moral principles as interpretive and rhetorical resources deployed and judged on the basis of their contingent appropriateness and usefulness. “One does not countervail another, any more than one eyesight countervails another,” as Whitman writes (1961 [1860], 109).

Whitman adds to the current array of normatively hued rhetorical and communication theory by emphasizing principles of plurality and contact. He models a liberalism not beholden to overarching ideals of rational deliberation, a civic artfulness not bound by prudence or republican refinement, a positive visionary alternative to the via negativa of genealogy, deconstruction, and critique, and a quasi-religious populist piety built upon the sensorial body and tolerant of many gods. These all add to the distinctiveness of his democratic polytheism.
Beyond amplifying normative resources found in Whitman, my essay is also intended to exemplify a form of rhetorical study that takes seriously processes of media and mass communication. While there has been excellent work examining the distinctive features of print and electronically mediated rhetoric, rhetorical studies as a field has a good distance to go before we have adequately extended analytic categories of a paradigmatically oral \textit{techne} to analysis of discourse composed for delivery in other media. The fact that rhetoric, media studies, and mass communication research stand as distinct and often fully separated subfields does not help this problem, which is both socio-institutional and intellectual. My essay represents one small effort in bridge building among the concepts of these distinct fields, showing how in Whitman’s case rhetorical technique combines with a print medium to instantiate a form of mass communication enacted through widely scattered individuals.

Overall, then, my essay sketches Whitman’s vision for polytheistic democracy and the rhetorical techniques by which he models and aims to actualize it. I begin by identifying selective contextual details of \textit{Leaves of Grass} in the 1850s, showing how Whitman drew inventional bearings from sacred tradition and popular media to craft a new bible for democracy. I then offer a reading of “Poem of Many in One,” outlining the borrowed sources of the poem’s central trope and discussing the techniques of copiousness, artistic ethos, and print-based direct address that power its rhetoric for polytheistic democracy. In conclusion, I draw a few implications of Whitman for contemporary study and practices of communication.

Inventing a bible for democracy: \textit{Leaves of Grass} in the 1850s

When Walt Whitman published the first three editions of \textit{Leaves of Grass} between 1855 and 1860, the U.S. political system was in disarray and the nation on the verge of disunion. The second party system had crumbled, and there was popular cynicism about the nation’s political institutions (Altschuler and Blumin 2000). Urban political society was undergoing significant structural transformations, as an integrated Jacksonian democracy of public association was giving way to prototypes of twentieth-century mass society, managed by the few and watched by a fragmented many (Ryan 1997). As a newspaperman in the 1840s, Whitman had been an active participant in ward-level Democratic politics, but in the 1850s he turned to politics by other means. Through poetic free verse, he hoped to do what
traditional political institutions seemed incapable of doing: refresh the nation’s democratic faith and bind the many together as one (Reynolds 1995, chap. 5; Erkkila 1989; Pease 1987). Whitman saw *Leaves* as a kind of “democratic scripture” (Erkkila 1989, 93) that would freshly inaugurate the nation’s shared public faith.

The 1850s were Whitman’s most vibrant period. In 1855, he published the first edition of *Leaves*, a prose preface followed by twelve poems that had largely been composed in the previous two years. The second (1856) and third (1860) editions of the book then initiated Whitman’s lifelong practice of adding new poems, revising and re-titling previously published ones, and arranging his poems in different order and “clusters.” Over five years the book grew from 85 to 456 pages and from 12 to 178 poems. (It would eventually go through six different versions and include 389 poems by the final, 1891–92 edition.) During this period, Whitman wrote many of his best poems, including those that became known as “Song of Myself,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” and “By Blue Ontario’s Shore.” As David Reynolds observes, “by 1860 his main oeuvre was behind him” (1995, 413).

Whitman drew deeply upon biblical sources for his democratic scripture, and confessed that he could not “have written a word of the *Leaves* without its religious rootground” (quoted in Reynolds 1995, 35). Perhaps influenced by Herder’s *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782, trans. 1833), he interpreted the Bible in unorthodox fashion and saw it as a great poem, akin to the *Iliad*. “The collect of the Bible as a traditional poem various in its sources and times, remains the most instructive, suggestive, even artistic memorial of the past,” Whitman wrote (quoted in Moon 1991, 237n3; see also Stovall 1974, 184–90). As he made new revisions in 1857, he understood his work to be “The Great Construction of the New Bible” (Whitman 1984, 353), an intention he announces in the opening poem of the 1860 *Leaves*—“I too, following many and followed by many, inaugurate a Religion” (Whitman 1961 [1860], 11). He was not alone in this aspiration—*Leaves* sat midway between *The Book of Mormon* (first published in 1830) and Mary Baker Eddy’s *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1875), and all were distinctly American efforts to inaugurate new faiths via the printed word. They were part of a vibrant popular religious culture also enraptured by the mysticisms of Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Swedenborgianism, and Harmonialism, and a huge variety of other attempts at moral and spiritual transformation (see Reynolds 1995, chap. 8).

If Whitman drew inventional bearings from biblical and other religious sources, he also absorbed the cheap, easy, and near-at-hand currents of mass media, urban street life, and other secular forms of popular com-
communication that traversed antebellum society. He grew up in Brooklyn, then America’s fastest growing city, and except for a brief period, lived continuously in the New York City area until moving to Washington during the Civil War. “The book [Leaves of Grass] arose out of my life in Brooklyn and New York from 1838 to 1853, absorbing a million people,” he would later write (quoted in Reynolds 1995, 83; see also Trachtenberg 1996). Whitman loved the crowds that city brought together, on streets or ferries, at theaters, public meetings, churches, or baseball games. He was fascinated by the human and material clutter of modern urban life (Folsom 1994a, 114–20), which provided the copious bodily sensations that helped undergird his new democratic scripture.

Beyond the bodily masses, Whitman also imbibed the sensations—and sensationalism—of print-based mass communication. In 1831, at the age of twelve, he became a newspaper apprentice, learned the printing trade, and commenced his lifelong fascination with the visual aspects of set type (Reynolds 1995, 45–47). He published his first signed newspaper article in 1834. In the 1840s and 1850s, he was a journalist and editor for several of the proliferating penny dailies. In the brash, combative, and sensationalist tone of popular journalism, he documented the sights and sounds of the city (Reynolds 1995, 98–110). He also tried his hand at sensational literature and in the 1840s wrote poems and short stories checkered with gore and titillation (Reynolds 1995, 85–97). All these currents of print media were absorbed in Leaves.

Whitman was similarly enthralled by the visual modes of expression that circulated around him. Photography was a lifelong obsession, and he was the most photographed writer of the nineteenth century (Folsom 1996; see also 1994a, 99–177). An engraved photo of the poet adorned the first cover of Leaves—a now-famous image of the young, bearded rough—hand on hip in jaunty, sensual repose. Whitman loved photography’s realism and aimed to make “his poetic ‘I’ a kind of roving camera eye aimed at the world around him” (Reynolds 1995, 283; see also Orvell 1989, chap. 1). As Whitman wrote in his notebook, “In these Leaves every thing is literally photographed” (quoted in Reynolds, 281). Popular paintings were equally important, particularly the spiritualized realism of American genre painters. Presented to the general public in a newly developing culture of popular exhibition, these paintings displayed broad interest in everyday activities, humanized minority groups, and presented the natural world with an almost mystical aura. Whitman drew upon them to craft his own democratic style and vision (Reynolds 1995, 286–305; Bohan 1992).
For his democratic scripture, Whitman also inhaled antebellum modes of oral communication and live bodily performance. He had a lifelong love of oratory and once remarked that he was “born, as it were, with propensities, from my earliest years, to attend popular American speech-gatherings, conventions, nominations, camp-meetings, and the like” (quoted in Reynolds 1995, 167). Political and religious orators like Cassius Clay, John P. Hale, and Henry Ward Beecher attracted large popular audiences and often displayed an interactive style marked by give-and-take address (166–75). Whitman’s poetry, which a number of commentators have called oratorical (e.g., Hollis 1994; Killingsworth 1994; Warren 1994), similarly blurred the lines between speaker and audience, and displayed its own kind of call and response. Popular theater and music, both of which exploded in the antebellum period, displayed a similar participatory spirit. Heterogeneous audiences boisterously contributed to live public events where performers mixed high and low cultures (see Levine 1988). Whitman drew upon all of these in his poetic rhetoric, which similarly traversed high, low, and leveled hierarchies of culture and value.

In short, *Leaves* would be a new democratic bible that mixed sacred and profane. It would draw upon the inventional resources of both Christianity’s canonical text and the bountiful currents of popular bodies, texts, and other modes of vernacular communication. In an age marked by political doubt and division, Whitman aimed to inaugurate new nodes for public confidence, faith together (Simonson 1999). He would offer “Chants inclusive—wide reverberating chants / Chants of the Many in One” (Whitman 1961 [1860], 8) that would both model and aim to initiate a polytheistic version of democratic mass communication by mobilizing rhetoric doubly refracted through media.

Sacred images and mediated returns: “Poem of Many in One”

Whitman’s attempt to use rhetorical means to actualize polytheistic democracy is best illustrated through “Poem of Many in One,” a massive, twenty-two-page work he composed for the second edition (1856) of *Leaves*. A crisp, poetized revision of the programmatic prose preface of the 1855 edition, it was a thesis poem that became Whitman’s most thoroughly revised text (Moon 1991) yet “remained through subsequent editions Whitman’s definitive social statement” (Reynolds 1995, 359). Between 1855 and 1860 he made only minor changes in it, reflecting relative stability in his social vision, though he gave the poem a new title—it became “Chants
Democratic 1,” the first of twenty-one numbered poems in the new “Chants Democratic” cluster, “Whitman’s most profound poetic response to the political crisis of democracy” (Erkkila 1989, 162). In the remainder of my essay, I focus on this antebellum thesis poem, quoting from the more easily available 1860 edition of Leaves.

Whitman’s social thesis statement is built around a central trope, the many in one. Although this trope has numerous influential expressions dating back to classical antiquity, two were especially important predecessors for Whitman: Paul of Tarsus’s image of the many members of the Christian ekklesia as the singular body of Christ, and the Revolutionary Era motto of the United States, “e pluribus unum.” The former was a key topos of Christian tradition, the latter a free-floating media creation that had become sacralized in the nation’s civil religion. Whitman drew upon both, but gave them new, sensualized, and radically democratic expression. In revised form, it became the poem’s central, constitutive trope, whose meaning Whitman elaborated and reiterated over twenty-two pages of his declarative chant democratic.

As I have argued elsewhere (Simonson 2003), the Pauline image of the ekklesia as body of Christ is one of the deepest rhetorical sources in the Christian tradition for the idea of universal communitas and mass communication. In a letter he wrote to an internally divided group of the Jesus sect in Corinth, Paul argued that members of the ekklesia (local assembly) were sinewed together through Christ’s mystical body. He reminded the Corinthians of their weekly ritual practice: “The bread which we break, is it not communion with the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16–17, AV). “For as the body is one,” he went on, “and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ” (12:12). Paul circulated the trope to other Mediterranean ekklesiae as well (see Rom. 12; Eph. 1; and Col. 1–3), and over time it took on decidedly translocal dimensions, corresponding to the growing geographical reach of the sect. The body of Christ came to symbolize not just the gathered assembly but the universal, temporally and geographically dispersed society of Christians past, present, and future, as well as the cosmos as a whole (ekklesia in its later, more expansive sense of universal church). As the matter is put in a letter to the Ephesians, “Christ is the head of the ekklesia, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills the whole creation” (Eph. 1:22–23). These letters, originally read out loud to local ekklesiae, were of course anthologized and disseminated in the Christian
Bible, from the Reformation through the nineteenth century the great popular media text of the increasingly literate masses in the Western world.

“Poem of Many in One” marshals the Pauline image in new corporeal form. “That only holds men together which is living principles,” Whitman writes, “as the holds of the limbs of the body” (115). Like Paul, he turns to the corporeal figure to express union. But for Whitman it is the poet-rhetor’s body, not Christ’s, which serves as the unifying force and symbol for a far-flung, democratic ekklesia. “By great bards only can series of peoples and States be fused together in compact organism of one nation,” he declares (115). Like Christ’s body, the bard’s assumes massive dimensions. “If the Atlantic coast stretch, or the Pacific coast stretch, he stretching with them north or south, / Spanning between them east and west, and touching whatever is between them” (112). Where Paul’s Christ had generated union through mystical marriage to the Christian ekklesia (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22–24; see also Kantorowicz 1957, 212–18), Whitman’s bard enjoins nation through a decidedly earthier form of union:

Plunging his Semitic muscle into the nation, the bard makes the ekklesia vocal through him, “A NATION announcing itself, (many in one)” (108).

If Whitman borrowed from and updated Paul of Tarsus, he also drew upon another, more historically proximate expression of the many in one, the socio-political motto “e pluribus unum”—from many, one. It had entered American sacred discourse in 1776, when Pierre Eugene Du Simitiere was appointed by the Continental Congress to help invent a coat of arms for the newly founded nation, a story Whitman may have known through a partly fictionalized account in Harper’s magazine (“The Great Seal,” 1856). Like Whitman, Du Simitiere had cosmopolitan interests in natural science, archeology, American history, and languages, and he absorbed the media of his day. “He cutts out of the Newspapers, every Scrap of Intelligence, and every Piece of Speculation,” John Adams wrote of Du Simitiere, “and pastes it upon clean Paper, arranging them under the Head of the State to which they belong and intends to bind them up in volumes” (quoted in Patterson and Dougall 1976, 18–19). Although Du Simitiere’s overall de-
sign was not adopted, “e pluribus unum,” which he inscribed on his drawing, became part of the nation’s Great Seal in 1782 (see Deutsch 1923; Patterson and Dougall 1976). By the 1790s, it was appearing on coins, those great mass media of modern market economies and an important source for its popular dissemination.

The origin of Du Simitiere’s Latin phrase long troubled philologists who combed classical literature in vain looking for its source. They found approximate analogues, but nothing matched the motto exactly, for, as they discovered, Du Simitiere drew the motto from less revered sources: a popular London magazine that printed it on its year-end collection of twelve months of issues. That periodical, Gentleman’s Magazine, had in turn borrowed the phrase from an earlier publication, Gentlemen’s Journal or the Monthly Miscellany (published 1691–94). E Pluribus Unum was a simulacrum of classical discourse, which came to Du Simitiere twice borrowed from popular media. Far from having noble political resonances, it was a way to label year-end collections: “Out of Many Magazines, One!”

Like Paul and Du Simitiere before him, Whitman aimed to symbolize the cosmopolitan many in one—the Greek root, symbolon, gathered or thrown together, points to the communicative work. “Poem of Many in One” updates what his predecessors did for God and Nation by reviving the sacred trope each had used. In great “postmodernist” fashion, Whitman follows Du Simitiere’s mode of rhetorical invention, happily taking decontextualized fragments of mediated discourse and marshaling them for new social purposes (cf. McGee 1990)—in the American context, the sacred has from the beginning been tied to the popular and mediated. Whitman also contributes to Du Simitiere’s project of forging a distinctively national community and political faith. But Whitman explicitly dismisses the socially constitutive power of the seal and motto Du Simitiere helped create. “To hold men together by paper and seal,” he insists, “is no account” (115).

Like Paul of Tarsus, Whitman turns to the constitutive figure of the far-ranging corporeal body (if in newly erotic form), but he uses it to symbolize a far different type of ekklesia. Paul believes that all parts of the corporate body are important, but there are also hierarchies in his social order (1 Cor. 12:28–30), and he uses the image of the body of Christ to justify women’s submission to their husbands (Eph. 5:21–25). Whitman imagines a radically egalitarian ekklesia, where “all is eligible to all” (109).

More important, Whitman rejects the teleologically ordered, monotheistic society that Paul’s Christ represents. “Have you thought there could be but a single Supreme?” Whitman challenges. “There can be any number of
Supremes—One does not countervail another, any more than one eyesight countervails another, or one life countervails another” (109). In short, Whitman envisions a polytheistic democratic ekklesia, a deeply pluralistic many whose diversities are given common form and made vocal in the bardic rhetor’s inclusive chants democratic.

Copious declaration and aestheticized chants

The logic of the many in one marks two entwined rhetorical techniques that power Whitman’s thesis poem—copious declaration and an artistically composed democratic ethos. Both techniques marshal a fertile abundance of detailed and disparate particularities and draw them together in common form, so the poem’s central message is reiterated and iconically represented in its central rhetorical techniques (cf. Leff and Sachs 1990). Like the poem’s constitutive trope and Whitman’s inventional mode more generally, these techniques assume shapes informed by both sacred tradition and contemporary popular communication. Together copia and ethos help constitute a democratic style that combines expansiveness and intimacy that the text aims to cultivate in individual readers widely scattered in space and time.

Whitman’s rhetorical copia are best exemplified in his famous catalogs and long rhythmic lists, which sometimes span several pages. Tellingly, the first catalog in “Poem of Many in One” occurs just after the poet-orator has incarnated the land and plunged “his Semitic muscle into its merits and demerits” (194). He makes it “diversities vocal in him,” its regions, history, citizens, movement:

Mississippi with yearly freshets and changing chutes—
Missouri, Columbia, Ohio, Niagara, Hudson,
spending themselves lovingly in him, . . .

Growths growing from him to offset the growth of
pine, cedar, hemlock, live-oak, locust, chestnut,
cypress, hickory, lime-tree, cotton-wood,
tulip-tree, cactus, tamarind, orange, magnolia,
persimmon, . . .

Surrounding the essences of real things, old times
and present times, . . .

The haughty defiance of the Year 1—war, peace,
the formation of the Constitution,
The separate States, the simple, elastic scheme, the immigrants,  
The Union, always swarming with blatherers, and always calm and impregnable, . . .

Congress convening every Twelfth Month, the members duly coming up from the uttermost parts;  
Surrounding the noble character of mechanics and farmers, especially the young men,  
Responding their manners, speech, dress, friendships — the gait they have of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors,  
The freshness and candor of their physiognomy, the copiousness and decision of their phrenology,  
The picturesque looseness of their carriage, their deathless attachment to freedom, their fieriness when wronged,  
The fluency of their speech, their delight in music, their curiosity, good-temper, and open-handedness — the whole composite make, . . .

Wharf-hemmed cities, railroad and steamboat lines, intersecting all points,  
Factories, mercantile life, labor-saving machinery, the north-east, north-west, south-west,  
Manhattan firemen, the Yankee swap, southern plantation life,  
Slavery, the tremulous spreading of hands to shelter it — the stern opposition to it, which ceases only when it ceases. (112–14)

This excerpt, which represents barely half the catalog, opens with a fertile incantation to the nation’s waters and natural growths, moves into details of its political history, its working people, the gestures and sensibilities of its young men, and its sites of economic movement, and then ends with the great social issue pushing the nation toward disunion — slavery. These are some of the copious particularities that constitute democratic public life. “For these and the like, their own voices!” Whitman declares. “For these, space ahead!” (114).

His catalogs represent copia, rhetorical abundance, and they are central to Whitman’s declarative rhetoric. As Fusfield and Anderson observe, declarative rhetoricians do not so much argue as announce “without proof their most important beliefs . . . [and then] devote a major portion of their discourse to reiterating these declarations in various forms” (Fusfield 1997, 133; following Anderson 1985, 37; see also Buell 1973, 166–68). Whitman’s poetic rhetor “is no arguer.” Rather, “he is judgment” (116). He “bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions, neither more nor
less, / He is the arbiter of the diverse” (115). Whitman’s catalogs effectively name and reiterate analogous details of the diverse composite whole that he announces (cf. Cmiel 2000), but never argues for, in the poem’s first line—“A NATION announcing itself, (many in one)” (108).

Stylistically, the catalogs meld sacred and ancient with profane and near at hand. Copious reiteration has roots in the oral poetry of the psalmists and Homer that Whitman admired. In the nineteenth century, Unitarian preachers and transcendentalist rhetors re-vivified that religious tradition (Buell 1973, 167–68). But the catalogues also mimicked the urban newspapers Whitman had helped produce before creating Leaves. As Mary Ryan has observed, “Long, rhythmic recitations of social categories . . . abound in antebellum chronicles of everyday life” (1997, 55). His lists also duplicated the form of popular art exhibitions, where hundreds of paintings or daguerreotypes hung floor to ceiling and disparate images were juxtaposed against one another (Bohan 1992, 19–22). Like other aspects of his rhetoric, Whitman’s copiousness drew inspiration from media, popular communication, and revered classical and religious texts. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once remarked, Whitman’s poetry was “a remarkable mixture of the Bhagvat Ghiita and the New York Herald.”

Before the hegemony of the spare, modernist style of address, copiousness helped define rhetorical excellence. Cicero viewed eloquence as copiose loquens sapientia, “wisdom speaking copiously” (De Partitione Oratoria 13.79, quoted in Sloane 1997, 46; see also 68). Whitman’s represents a distinctively democratic eloquence that orators and other public language users forged in mid-nineteenth-century America (Cmiel 1990). His catalogued copia name the variegated phenomena, high and low, which rightfully claim attention in a democratic public culture. Ranging from the heroic (“the haughty defiance of Year 1”) to the everyday (the dress, gait, and phrenology of America’s young men), Whitman’s lists display willingness to make symbolic contact with all realms of society and culture, from the delightful to the despised, the quotidian to the exceptional.

The meaning of the catalogs comes together in the poem’s key line, “Here is what moves in magnificent masses, carelessly faithful of particulars” (111). It describes the urban crowds Whitman loved and the pluralistic solidarity he aimed to cultivate, both of which are represented in his catalogs. Line follows upon line, punctuated by commas which function to bring dissimilar elements together in common grammatical structure. “Strung along by nothing but the copula and” (James 1981 [1907], 77), copious particulars are bound together in rhythmic sequence where they achieve a new, emergent form, moving in magnificent masses. This form
neither submerges particularity nor insists upon it with moralistic vigilance; it is *carelessly* faithful, maintaining convivial habits of attention to individual entities and groups yet seeing them as part of a fluid and shifting ensemble. “Flood-tide below me! I watch you face to face,” as he puts the issue in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” his greatest poem of the crowd (379). Now singularity, now moving tide, “myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated, yet part of the scheme” (379).

Like Whitson and Poulakos’s Nietzschean rhetoric, Whitman’s catalogued chants are “part of a greater act—the act of ordering the chaos of life” (1993, 136). They “summon appearances” and offer an entry into “a world more enchanting and more sufferable than the one you now inhabit” (137, 142). Like Nietzsche, Whitman aims to create beautiful speech—“Give me to speak beautiful words! take all the rest!” (Whitman 1961 [1860],121). Like Nietzsche, he is “animating to life itself” (118). But while Nietzsche’s social vision was calibrated to see the herd mentality all around him, Whitman remained “carelessly faithful of particulars.” His democrat poet “sees farthest [and] has the most faith, / His thoughts are the hymns of praise of things, / . . . He sees eternity in men and women” (116). As a result, Whitman offers entry into a world for which Nietzsche had neither capacity nor inclination. Willing to make contact with all the men and women peopling his crowded catalogues, Whitman summons the familiar appearances of everyday life and enchants them with the sounds of polytheistic democratic hymn.

Democratic ethos and print-based direct address

Whitman’s catalogs are tied to a second key element of his rhetoric, the artistic production of an open-ended, aesthetically oriented democratic ethos. As even casual readers quickly recognize, the poetic “I” is one of the most prominent elements of *Leaves of Grass*. It is an “I” that alternates between great socio-symbolic expansiveness and direct contact with the individual audience member. In this respect, ethos works analogously to Whitman’s catalogued copia and moves between embracing magnificent masses and remaining carelessly faithful of particulars. It also iconically represents the movement between many and one, symbolically achieving within itself the pluralistic commonality of democratic mass communication.

Whitman’s poetic address features an ethos with cosmopolitan range and radical openness. Like the universal Christ whose ecclesiastical body
“fills the whole creation” (Eph. 1:23) and like Adam, conceptualized in early rabbinic traditions as large enough to traverse heaven and earth (Davies 1955, 45–46), Whitman’s poetic “I” “span[s] . . . east and west, and touch[es] whatever is between them” (1961 [1860], 112). Symbolically assuming these dimensions, speaker spans nation, “hanging on its neck with incomparable love” and “making . . . its diversities vocal in him” (112). Speaker and nation become one. “I swear I dare not shirk any part of myself,” he proclaims after one of the poem’s last catalogs, “Not any part of America, good or bad” (124). “Copious as you are,” he writes of the catalogued diversities, “I absorb you all in myself” (125).

In absorbing the catalogued copia, the rhetor’s ethos is marked by democratic aestheticism, which the political theorist George Kateb identifies as “receptivity or responsiveness to as much as the world as possible” (2000, 31). More than any other quality, this receptivity characterizes Whitman’s “I.” Open to both sacred and profane, to both the distant and the near at hand, it gazes broadly, circulates fluidly, embraces promiscuously. With the fertile copula “and,” it absorbs all phenomena that come within its expansive range. Ethos gives singular form to the multiplicitous copia it encounters.

This dialectic of many and one also marks a second aspect of Whitman’s artistic ethos—the disposition of poet-rhetor toward audience. On the one hand, Whitman broadcasts his message promiscuously, scattering it to the winds via the impersonal and broadly distributed medium of print. The opening poem of the 1860 Leaves, for instance, envisions:

See projected, through time,
For me an audience interminable, . . .
Successions of men, Americanos, a hundred millions, . . .
With faces turned sideways or backward toward me to listen,
With eyes retrospective toward me. (6–7)

At the same time, Whitman addresses individual members of his audience directly and intimately, singling one out from the anonymous many. He often uses the second person singular. “Have you thought there could be but a single Supreme?” he asks in the third stanza of “Poem of Many in One.” “There can be any number of Supremes . . . All is eligible to all, / All is for individuals—All is for you” (109). Soon, his direct challenge picks up force. “I am he who goes through the streets with barbed tongue, questioning everyone I meet—questioning you up there now,” he declares. “Who are you, that wanted only to be told what you knew before?” (110). “You up there now”—the words speak up to me from the page. Impersonal ad-
dress is made personal. I sit upright for the challenge. My mind is newly focused, for I too am being questioned.

Whitman’s direct address often calls attention to the physical qualities of his medium of indirect address. It was a hybrid rhetorical technique that mixed popular oratorical style with the materially structured experience of the printed word. He called this “direct addressing to you” an “animated ego-style,” and it marked the popular oratory of Henry Ward Beecher, Cassius Clay, Wendell Phillips, and others in the antebellum period (Reynolds 1995, 170–75; see also Hollis 1994). Filled with personal pronouns, it called out responses from the audience. “Yes, the place of the orator and his hearers is truly an agonistic arena,” Whitman once wrote, and he conceived of his poetry in similar terms. “The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as much as I have mine,” he wrote (quoted in Reynolds 1995, 172, 175). To translate this oral style, he drew upon the visual acuity he had developed for the printed word since serving as a typographer’s apprentice as a young man. When new editions of Leaves came out, he studied the typeset versions of his poems and imagined his readers looking at the printed page (Reynolds 1995, 45–47, 385–87). He knew that media did not just carry discourse but presented qualitatively new modes of rhetorical effectivity and social contact. Long before Franklin Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats beamed conversational address to an audience in widely scattered domestic space (see Jamieson 1988), Whitman made rhetorical appeals designed for reception by individuals in private space.

To that end, Whitman supplements pointed agonistic challenges with more delicate and palpably sensual types of direct address. In the closing lines of the final poem of the 1860 Leaves, for instance, “So Long,” he again calls upon the individual audience member by drawing attention to the physical medium:

This is no book,
Who touches this, touches a man,
(Is it night? Are we alone?)
It is I you hold, and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth.

O how your fingers drowse me!
Your breath falls around me like dew—your pulse lulls the tympans of my ears,
I feel immerged from head to foot,
Delicious—enough . . .

Dear friend, whoever you are, here, take this kiss,
I give it especially to you—Do not forget me, . . . (455–56)
Here is the kind of mediated intimacy-at-a-distance and personal address from a stranger that a century later would earn the derogatory of “parasocial interaction” (Horton and Wohl 1955). Whitman recognized its rhetorical power and beauty and cultivated it through deft use of the material aspects of media reception. The individual reader, fingers on page, palpably in contact with the rhetor’s words, is made newly aware of the rhetorical act by this call to the here and now of communicative reception. At the end of a book bursting with superabundant copia and symbolic expansiveness, Whitman addresses the solitary reader. Promiscuous aestheticism gives way to care for the particular encounter between rhetor and audience member.

Receptivity and the mass communication of polytheistic democracy

Out of these heightened moments of audience reception, Whitman aims to cultivate receptivity. More precisely, he aims to fertilize the cultivation of receptive democratic ethoi in audience members widely scattered in space and time. This is a project that Leaves both models and aims to instantiate, and in so doing to set in motion polymorphous points of contact between members of his “audience interminable” and the social worlds they inhabit, a process that constitutes the mass communication of his polytheistic democracy.

The final pages of “Poem of Many in One” reveal this process. In its last catalog, each line ends with the phrase “are you and me”:

O I see now, flashing, that this America is only you and me,
Its power, weapons, testimony, are you and me,
Its roughs, beards, haughtiness, ruggedness, are you and me, . . .
Its crimes, lies, thefts, deflections, slavery, are you and me, . . .
Freedom, language, poems, employments, are you and me, . . .
Past, present, future, are only you and me. (123–24)

“You and me” is a rich coupling of personal pronouns. “You” is both singular and plural. It is another moment of direct address, designed to connect me afresh and involve me with Whitman’s mediated address. It also encourages me to remember the other “you’s” in Whitman’s scattered audience—before or after me, distant in space and time, yet like me reading these words. “Me” is similarly polyvocal, referring to both Whitman and to the pages in front of me—to the man, and to the book that is the man. Enjoined, “you and me” give rise to the copia of democratic life: rhetortext is newly activated by audience, singular and collective, which then
WALT WHITMAN’S “POEM OF MANY IN ONE”

This message is underscored in the poem’s peroration, when poet-rhetor turns back to the first-person singular. “I swear I dare not shirk any part of myself,” he declares,

Not any part of America, good or bad, . . .
Copious as you are, I absorb you all in myself, and become the master myself.
The Many in One—what is it finally except myself?
These States—what are they except myself.
I have learned why the earth is gross, tantalizing, wicked—it is for my sake,
I take you to be mine, you beautiful, terrible, rude forms. (124–25)

Whitman ends his thesis poem by performing what he had before declared—“all is for individuals” (109), “underneath all are individuals” (122). He announces a Herculean receptivity that, open equally to the terrible and the beautiful, lies beyond good and evil. Recognition and receptivity, he declares, are ultimately the responsibility of the individual.

As a reader, my task is then to break from Whitman, to turn from our poetico-rhetorical encounter and cultivate my own kinds of receptivity. “Once more I enforce you to give play to yourself,” Whitman admonishes as the end of Leaves, “and not depend on me, or on any one but yourself” (452). “To give play to yourself” is an individualized project that rests upon the twin rhetorical techniques mobilized in “Poem of Many in One”: generating copia and giving them form through an aesthetically oriented democratic ethos. Whitman’s catalogs can help in this project, “stoking the mind with variety” like the Erasmian copia Thomas Sloane admires and sees as “another way of exploring the via diversa” (Sloane 1997, 57, 77).

And just as Erasmus taught that “true copia inheres less in linguistic or even in conceptual abundance and more in the mental agility it takes to cope with that richness or abundance” (63), so Whitman calls us to develop a democratic ethos directed toward recognizing and finding place for the world’s variety—not just its obvious beauty, but its “terrible rude, forms” as well.

Out of such ethoi arises
a life that shall be copious, vehement,
spiritual, bold, . . .

each . . . absorbing,
Swifly on, but a little while alighting,
Curious enveloped messages delivering,
Sparkles hot, seed ethereal, down in the dirt dropping . . .
To ages, and ages yet, the growth of the seed leaving, . . . (454)

Whitman’s copia spill beyond themselves and take root in wildly different forms of life. His democratic aestheticism regenerates itself in new hermeneutic soil, cultivated by readers who practice their own distinct kinds of open-ended receptivity. In fluid circulation through the world, they find solid points of contact, “a little while alighting.” Gathering encounters, they chant new “hymns of praise of things” (116), new catalogs of possibility which might serve as the memory places for democratic imagination and the topoi for new democratic practice. Extending over time and space, the polytheistic mass is celebrated in disparate and divergent ways, with internal momentum toward both ensemble and carelessly faithful particularity.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by briefly sketching some of Whitman’s possible significance for contemporary practices and understandings of rhetoric, mass communication, and democratic life. Much of this hinges upon our own processes of imitatio, of reading Whitman with an eye toward embodying aspects of his technique and vision for our own purposes and contexts. Whitman excelled at a mode of rhetorical invention that drew upon the rich possibilities of found discourse in an age of broadly distributed media and other forms of popular communication. Newspapers, photography, exhibitions of paintings and daguerreotypes, popular theater, music, and oratory—all of these provided invention resources for Whitman’s poetic rhetoric, which displays the kind of symbolic excess that has become a familiar part of a modern life marked by proliferating media channels and the sensory plenitude of urban existence. He also drew upon the distinctive material qualities and structured reception experience of mediated address and showed how media can enhance rhetoric, not simply by distributing words further but by providing new types of expression and new avenues to contact and effectivity. In all of these ways, he showed the potentially fruitful interplay between the paradigmatically oral techne of rhetoric and forms of mediated expression.

At the same time, Whitman never fell fully into the cheap and plentiful worlds of mass-mediated discourse and popular entertainments, but also looked to topoi, rhetorical styles, and deeper hermeneutical orienta-
tions provided by sacred tradition. He approached these as a world-creating poet, bending them to his own purposes, but he maintained interpretive contact with them. His unorthodox use of the biblical trope of the ekklesia as body of Christ is one instance of a broader poetico-rhetorical remaking that gave the old and sacred new resonance. This contact and creativity with the texts of sacred traditions is potentially instructive for contemporary rhetorical theory and practice. In the realm of civic eloquence, biblical topoi are part of a radical tradition of prophetic rhetoric that has had powerful impacts on American history (Darsey 1997). For the language games of rhetorical and communication theory, religious texts carry understandings and tropes that can be deployed for new purposes, as in John Peters’s (1999) reading of the Christian parable of the sower of seeds as an image of broadcasting (see also Marvin and Ingle 1999; Simonson 2003). Too often, religious texts are taboo intellectual resources in mainstream circles of rhetorical and communication studies, but careful reading of them, by minds calibrated toward very different sets of questions, represents just the sort of indeterminate contact with otherness that Whitman models and aims to cultivate.

Whitman also provides a model for the sort of ecumenical, broad-representation forum that every democratically oriented group arguably needs. Whitman’s aesthetically composed copia aim to represent the kaleidoscopic variety of particulars that constituted the “many in one” of the 1850s United States. This meant that his poetry was radically open to any type of natural, cultural, or social life, including those derided, despised, or the subjects of disinterest. “For these and the like, their own voices!” he wrote. “For these, space ahead!” (114). This remains a powerful regulative ideal for a democratic public life that might find room for heterogeneity of every sort—not just that which is commercially attractive, culturally fashionable, or politically correct at a given time. He pushes us to make room for variety in all its varieties, a project whose radical force is reigned in and domesticated in most calls for inclusivity, which usually mean inclusivity of a finite and preferential range of social phenomena. Whitman’s cosmopolitan representation of particulars stands ready as an ideal to guide and evaluate the practices of forums and media that purport to represent specific groups and institutions: are they truly open to all the copious variety of their membership, or do they limit themselves to the powerful, the favored, or the appealing? In our own professional life, this seems to me a question that journal editors should ask themselves, particularly those who control the central, broad-focus publications in a field.
Finally, Whitman offers normative visions for the democratic being-in-the-world of individuals, a concept currently out of vogue in communication studies and elsewhere. Attention to larger social and symbolic formations complement antihumanist critiques of the bourgeois subject to problematize “the individual” from two directions. Both lines of analysis provide important correctives to idealized versions of liberal or civic republican humanism, and to a large degree I subscribe to each. Yet both miss a fundamental aspect of the human condition. We may be thrown into cultural and discursive matrices that set the parameters of conceptual possibility. We may live through social institutions and roles that establish the possibilities of action and interaction. We may be drawn in different and competing directions by forces that are both larger and smaller than we are. But we are also individual, material bodies who perambulate through the world in time that cannot be reversed, and who, in the midst of constraints of many sorts, often find ways to direct energies and attention this way and not that. Our bodies are positioned in hugely differing social structures. Some are offered the possibility to guide large institutions or to circulate their logoi by means of powerful communication technologies, and others are shut out and dominated by those forces. Power differs radically. But all of us inhabit more or less mobile bodies that enflesh minds with the propensity to wander. In such a condition, we can alight upon one set of phenomena and not another. We must therefore decide how to perambulate, materially and symbolically.

Whitman offers direction at this level of being. His poetic rhetoric lights upon and enchants the copious phenomena of the world. It represents a mode of perambulation, of seeing, recognizing, and finding place for all the animate and material particularities we encounter. This is the stuff of a democratic ethos. For all the talk of tolerance and appreciation of otherness within the academy, there are out-groups to which our collective social imagination rarely extends in any meaningful way—to flag-waving patriots, for instance, conservative religious believers, the mentally ill, racists, violent criminals, gun owners, terrorists, the small-town bourgeoisie, or vast swaths of the working classes. This points to a great moral blind spot we share, awkwardly papered over by abstract slogans championing “difference” and “the other.” Whitman’s catalogs represent a different way to dwell with life’s deep pluralism, through a more radical kind of receptivity that is in principle open to every phenomenon and social particular. This stance hinges upon democratic ethos of the sort Whitman displays and aims to cultivate. It is an ethos marked by yea-saying—not the yea-
saying of instinct or desire or daemonic force but one that is directed toward the world. “Are you faithful to things?” Whitman challenges us,

Do you teach whatever the land and sea, the bodies of men, womanhood, amativeness, angers, excesses, crimes, teach? . . . Are you done with reviews and criticisms of life? animating to life itself? . . . Do you hold the like love for those hardening to maturity? for the last-born? little and big? and for the errant?” (118)

This is faith of a democratic sort, a faith without metaphysical other-worldliness or moral asceticism. It is characterized by willingness to perambulate toward those who are shunned by the social sets of which we are a part, whoever they might be. As William James once wrote, “Being grows under all sorts of resistances in this world of the many” (1961 [1907], 131). Following Whitman and James, we might say that polytheistic democracy is about expanding the copia of our social imaginations, deepening our habits of tolerance and receptivity, and creating moments of contact and pluralistic commonality with the resistances that mark this world of the many.

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Notes
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1. My reading is also neo-pragmatist in that it complements Richard Rorty’s characterization of pragmatism as “romantic polytheism” (1998), though I developed my interpretation independent of his essay. Rorty links polytheism with “the substitution of poetry for religion as a source of ideals” and the belief “that there are diverse, conflicting, but equally valuable forms of human life” (22, 23), both of which are consonant with my argument about Whitman. Whitman plays a cameo role in Rorty’s article, but as a poet of democracy (25, 32) and open possibility (34–35) more than a poet of polytheism. My reading extends Rorty both by making Whitman’s own romantic polytheism more explicit and by drawing out its key rhetorical components.


4. For a good brief introduction to the publication history and various editions of Leaves, see the Walt Whitman Hypertext Archive (http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/whitman). To trace the revision of poems through different editions, consult Sculley Bradley and others, eds., 1980; see also Michael Moon (1991).

5. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent page numbers refer to this facsimile edition of the 1860 Leaves.
6. Noah Webster inserted the phrase in his 1841 dictionary (Patterson and MacDougall 1976), a book Whitman loved to pore over (Folsom 1994a, chap. 1). He called it the official motto of the United States.

7. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, declarative rhetoric was favored by the German Romantic Friedrich Schlegel (Fusfield 1997) who, like the sophists who also practiced the declarative craft, stressed rhetoric’s aesthetic and ontologically constitutive capacities (see Poulakos 1983, 1995, esp. chap. 2).

8. After the Civil War, the key line was changed, and became “careless of particulars.” Whitman was under the influence of Hegelian idealism, and his earlier interest in particularity was subsumed to the Grand One. Discussing the evolution of the poem and Whitman’s social vision, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.

Works Cited


Walt Whitman’s “Poem of Many in One”