

“ALL GOES ONWARD AND OUTWARD”: CONTINUATION IN WHITMAN’S *SONG OF MYSELF*

Anita Bedi

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Guru Nanak College, Moga, Punjab, India

ABSTRACT

Whitman’s *Song of Myself* imagines continuity without requiring the persistence of an unchanged form. Grass, body, ancestry, decay, and renewal remain distinct while participating in processes that extend beyond their immediate boundaries. “All goes onward and outward” consequently suggests a world in which transformation is not the interruption of continuity but its mode. What persists in Whitman is not always sameness, but relation: one form passes something of itself into what follows.

INTRODUCTION

“What is the grass?” The child’s question in *Song of Myself* appears to invite a simple act of naming, yet Whitman answers by making the object increasingly difficult to contain within a name. Grass becomes “the flag of my disposition,” “the handkerchief of the Lord,” “itself a child,” “a uniform hieroglyphic,” and finally “the beautiful uncut hair of graves.” No answer cancels the one before it. The object remains grass, but every attempt to say what it is carries it into another relation. (Whitman, sec. 6)

The movement is characteristic of Whitman. Things possess form, but their meanings and histories do not stop at the edges of that form. A blade of grass belongs at once to soil, body, memory, divinity, birth, and death. The individual body is made from “this soil, this air” and from generations of bodies preceding it. Life itself will later become “the leavings of many deaths.” Everywhere, a form that appears complete opens beyond itself. (Whitman, secs. 1, 49)

Whitman’s declaration that “All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses” is therefore more suggestive than a simple reassurance that life follows death. It points toward a larger idea of continuation. What continues need not remain what it was. Something can lose its present form and yet remain active in what comes after it. The poem repeatedly places existence within such passages—from body to earth, ancestor to descendant, death to growth, experience to language, and finally poet to reader. (Whitman, sec. 6)

Continuity in *Song of Myself* is thus not merely survival. It is continuation through transformation.

Continuity Beyond Form

The grass provides Whitman with an unusually small image through which to imagine this larger movement. When the speaker considers that it may be the “uncut hair of graves,” the living sprout stands at the meeting point of what ordinarily seem to be opposites. It grows, yet it is associated with the dead. It suggests beginning while emerging from what appears to have ended. (Whitman, sec. 6)

Whitman does not resolve this tension by pretending that death and life are the same thing. Instead, he alters the relation between them:

“The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life.” (Whitman, sec. 6)

The significance lies in “led forward.” Life does not simply replace death as though the earlier condition had never existed. Nor does the dead body remain unchanged beneath the new growth. Something has passed forward while form has altered. (Whitman, sec. 6)

This allows Whitman to arrive at his expansive affirmation:

“All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses.” (Whitman, sec. 6)

“Nothing collapses” does not mean that nothing ends. Whitman’s world is full of endings: bodies age, organisms die, matter decays, and generations disappear. What the poem refuses is the idea that the ending of a form necessarily amounts to absolute disappearance. (Whitman, sec. 6)

The same logic is already present in Whitman’s apparently self-assured celebration of the “I.” His individual body is never entirely individual in origin:

“My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same.” (Whitman, sec. 1)

The self is distinct, yet what constitutes it has arrived from elsewhere. Soil and air become body; earlier bodies become ancestry; inherited matter becomes the speaking “I.” The form is singular without being self-originating.

This distinction matters in a poem so frequently associated with unity. Whitman does not need difference to disappear in order for relation to become possible. *Song of Myself* delights in particularity—in bodies, professions, races, landscapes, textures, voices, and “manifold objects, no two alike.” Union does not require sameness. What changes is the assumption that difference must imply absolute separation. (Whitman, sec. 7)

Grass remains grass. The body remains body. The self remains recognizably a self. Yet each exists through relations that exceed it.

Seen in this way, the succession of Whitman’s answers to “What is the grass?” no longer appears merely evasive. The grass cannot easily be isolated because every attempt to understand it discovers what it participates in. Its identity continually opens outward. (Whitman, sec. 6)

What Grows After and Out of Itself

Later in the poem, Whitman gives this pattern a striking formulation:

“Every condition promulges not only itself, it promulges what grows after and out of itself.” (Whitman, sec. 45)

The sentence extends the meaning of a condition beyond the time in which it visibly exists. Something is not confined to what it presently is; it is also involved in what emerges “after and out of” it. (Whitman, sec. 45)

Whitman’s choice of direction is important. Again and again his vocabulary moves forward rather than backward: *after*, *out of*, *forward*, *onward*, *outward*. Continuation is not a return to an original form. It is generative movement.

A parent continues into a child without becoming the child. The body incorporates what had previously been soil, air, plant, or animal without leaving those things unchanged. A spoken

experience becomes language and enters another consciousness. One condition gives itself toward another without requiring the second condition to reproduce the first.

The principle becomes more physical when Whitman turns again toward mortality:

“And as to you Corpse I think you are good manure...” (Whitman, sec. 49)

The provocation of the line lies partly in its refusal to preserve the corpse as a sacred, untouchable remnant of identity. Whitman immediately sees roses growing and reaches toward the “polish’d breasts of melons.” Decay and abundance occupy the same movement. (Whitman, sec. 49)

Then comes the reversal:

“And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths.” (Whitman, sec. 49)

Instead of imagining death only as what waits at the end of life, Whitman discovers death behind present life. The living world is already made from former endings. Life does not merely proceed toward death; it inherits from it.

His phrase for this movement is wonderfully economical:

“O perpetual transfers and promotions.” (Whitman, sec. 49)

A transfer does not preserve location. Something passes from one condition into another. Whitman’s continuity is therefore mobile rather than static. Its persistence lies precisely in the possibility of passage.

This is why “what grows after and out of itself” becomes so central to the poem’s larger imagination. A form may cease, yet consequences, matter, relation, memory, or influence proceed beyond the visible limits of that form. Continuity becomes less a question of *remaining* than of *carrying forward*. (Whitman, sec. 45)

The distinction also keeps Whitman from collapsing everything into an indistinguishable whole. If all forms were simply one thing, there would be no meaningful transfer between them. Transfer requires difference. Growth requires a before and an after. Transformation preserves a relation precisely because the forms on either side are not identical.

Whitman’s universe is therefore expansive without being featureless. It holds together distinction and continuity.

Perpetual Continuation

This understanding finally returns to the poet himself. Near the end of *Song of Myself*, Whitman imagines his own body returned to the earth and directs the reader to look for him “under your boot-soles.” The gesture is often associated with his confidence in immortality, but it carries another implication as well. Whitman does not insist that the reader encounter him again in the form in which he presently speaks. (Whitman, sec. 52)

The poet can be sought in dirt, grass, bodily matter, words, memory, and the continuing experience of the reader. His presence becomes dispersed rather than simply preserved.

The movement resembles, without being identical to, the image later used by Thich Nhat Hanh of a cloud becoming rain. The cloud ceases to be recognizable as cloud but does not thereby become nothing. The comparison should not turn Whitman into a Buddhist thinker; their ideas of selfhood and immortality emerge from different traditions. What the image

helps illuminate is a distinction already vivid in Whitman: loss of form and absolute cessation are not necessarily the same event.

Whitman's grass embodies that intuition without requiring a philosophical system to explain it. The blade exists as itself, yet it carries into visibility conditions that preceded it and will eventually enter conditions that follow it. Its present form is real but not final.

The same relation holds between the poem's larger apparent opposites. Birth and death remain different, but one can "lead forward" the other. Self and world remain distinguishable, yet the self is made from soil, air, ancestry, nourishment, encounter, and language. The individual exists, but never entirely by itself. (Whitman, sec. 6)

What appears at first to be Whitman's poetry of limitless inclusion may therefore be understood more precisely as a poetry of **continuing relation**. Things do not need to lose their particularity in order to belong to one another. Their connectedness lies not in being identical, but in continually entering the conditions of other forms.

CONCLUSION

"All goes onward and outward" captures more than Whitman's resistance to the finality of death. It names a movement running through *Song of Myself*: forms arise from what precedes them, exist for a time in recognizable distinction, and participate in what follows. (Whitman, sec. 6)

The grass does not abolish the difference between life and death. It grows across that difference. The self does not cease to be individual; its individuality is revealed as composed through relations larger than itself. What grows "after and out of" a condition is not necessarily identical to that condition, but neither is it wholly disconnected from it. (Whitman, sec. 45)

Whitman's continuity therefore depends neither upon changelessness nor upon the disappearance of distinction. It occurs through transformation.

The smallest sprout does not show that nothing changes.

It shows why change need not mean that everything has ended.

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