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Whitman's Poetry in Space: The Reach of Affectivity

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Abstract

Discussing the space of the poem has been a long-standing tendency of criticism. Often employing cognitive poetics, this paper discusses *how* and *where* Walt Whitman's poetry places itself. To this purpose, it specifically looks at the poet's use of second-person writing, abstractness, and the relations between speaker and reader as found in his poetry. Moreover, it analyzes constructions which give Whitman's poetry a divergent, emotional nature. Whitman, the American bard, the 'good gray poet,' is notorious for his invocations, exclamations, and exaltations of life and America. His poetry entered the American landscape with great originality: his break from convention was so compelling that American poets following him must have felt, as William Carlos Williams remarks in "America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry" (1917), that "the only way to be like Whitman is to write *unlike* Whitman" (1). One of Whitman's innovations, in form and in content, consists of a direct and intimate addressal of the reader.Though much has been written on this subject, this paper puts forth an additional, original understanding of Whitman's poetry through a formal study of the space that the writer creates, and sustains, throughout his works. Whitman's poetry emerges as one which is primarily based on affectivity, and which aims to concretely transform the reader. In the space between the speaker and the reader, a compounded self emerges, one in which 'I' and 'you' merge. This is further supported by a formal (and, in *Song of Myself*, literal) death of the speaker. Ultimately, the reader needs to embody and actuate Whitman's poems, and therefore also the speaker's social and ideological ideals: the dependency between the 'I' and the 'you,' in Whitman's poetry, is both formal, moral, and political. Employing theories from cognitive poetics, this paper therefore presents a novel insight into not only the liminal space of Whitman's poetry, but also into the American poet's motives and formal crafting.

Keywords: American poetry; Walt Whitman; cognitive poetics; affectivity; reader-response criticism.

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Literary criticism has long been concerned with the space of the poem. Some schools have focused predominantly on form and outlook (for instance, Objectivism, Formalism, New Criticism, New Formalism, and New Aestheticism). Since at least 1945, with Joseph Frank's essays on the concept of spatial form, scholars have moved onto the internal spaces of the works as well. Affectivity and cognitive poetics have further built frameworks to observe the locations of literary works. These may help complement emerging schools of literary thought. Ambient literature, for one, may benefit from more formal readings. As noted by Abba et al. in *Ambient Literature* (2020), this new concept looks at how 'place-based writing and location-based technologies' shape literary experiences[1]. Though it incorporates new technologies, ambient writing as understood in a larger sense offers various possibilities of inquiry. Contributing to this area of knowledge, this essay discusses, often through cognitive poetics, how and where Whitman's poetry places itself. Specifically, it looks at the poet's use of second-person writing, abstractness, and the relation between speaker and reader.

Reuven Tsur, the founding father of cognitive poetics, explains that this discipline aims to account for the exchanges which happen between the structures of literary works and the effects they have on the readers[2]. One significant way in which poetry can affect the reader is through its emotional power. According to Tsur, poetry with divergent tendencies is emotional, whereas poetry with a predominance of convergent tendencies is rational or witty[3]. Convergent structures emerge when the poem's syntactical, prosodic, and phonetic patterns are tightly interwoven[4]. Divergent poetry renders the message of a text particularly affective on the right hemisphere of the brain. As Orenstein's study of consciousness (1975) shows, the right brain hosts such vaguer perceptions as the sense of orientation in space, feelings, and mystical experiences; semantic features exist there, but their information is simultaneous and integrated, 'as it appears in consciousness'.[5]

This essay specifically discusses two constructions which give Whitman's poetry a divergent, emotional nature: deixis and abstraction. Deixis constitutes a type of reference the interpretation of which depends on extra-linguistic contexts; deictic words include, for instance, 'me', 'you', 'here', and 'there', as their meaning depends on something which needs previous specification. Deixis acts upon abstraction, or lack of stable visual shapes, and therefore necessarily makes the reader construct an imaginary situation[6]. Whitman's poetry abounds in deictic words, especially in the form of the personal pronouns 'I' and 'you'. Through them, the poet stimulates both the capacities of abstraction and the imagination of his

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readers: his praise of elevated thought, spirituality, and ideals is reflected in, and triggered by, his use of abstraction and deixis.

Whitman's 'Song of the Open Road' (1856) features interesting uses of deictic words, especially personal pronouns, and abstraction. The first lines of the poem open with the poet's customary 'I', with an only vaguely contextualized and specified first person:

> Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
> Healthy, free, the world before me,
> The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.[7]

'Wherever I choose' may be considered a deictic phrase, as its meaning depends on something which requires further description. From the beginning, Whitman establishes an imaginative space which is free of limitations or borders. Although the speaker's 'I' is repeated throughout the poem, it is notable that, unlike in *Song of Myself* (1855), the pronoun 'you' recurs more frequently (87 times) than 'I' (75 times) in 'Song of the Open Road'. Moreover, this 'you' does not always refer to the same person, object, or concept. It is not until the end of Section 6 that, through his 'you', the speaker addresses the reader. The first 'you' is the road which the speaker travels, followed by a selection of abstract nouns, concrete objects the speaker encounters, the open road again, and men and women the speaker may encounter. Finally, 'you' is used in a general sense, as in 'one', before referring to the reader.

Section 3 figures most of these addressees. 'You' is the anaphoric word for the entire section, which begins with:

> You air that serves me with breath to speak!
> You objects that call from diffusion my meanings and give them shape!
> You light that wraps me and all things in delicate equable showers!
> You paths worn in the irregular hollows by the roadsides![8]

A process of 'Othering' seems to emerge towards the various objects that the speaker addresses before referring to the reader. As Stephen Railton notes, Whitman's 'you' is the only other person in his poetry: the 'I' seems to include everything else apart from the 'you'.[9] This may

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be compared to a process of Othering of the 'you's, considering that the speaker's first person is otherwise all-inclusive. The tension between the 'I' and the 'you', the speaker and the reader, is essential to Whitman's poetics. The 'I' is always dependent on the 'you':[10] Whitman's all-comprehensive first person always longs for the Other, what is not known to him, what he does not (metaphorically, but also physically) possess – the 'you', the reader. 'Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you', begins Whitman's poem 'To a Stranger' (1867), ending: 'I am to see to it that I do not lose you'.[11] At the 'stranger', an example of Otherness, the speaker looks with a longing that resembles lust. The concluding remark similarly underscores the dependency between 'I' and 'you', speaker and Other.

It is significant to investigate what these two deictic pronouns indicate, as they make the reader imagine the context of the poem and position themselves in its space. In the first sections of 'Song of the Open Road', as mentioned, the speaker's surroundings become the various 'you's, so that the reader seems to take residence inside the 'I'. The speaker had previously announced that people reside in him always, thereby justifying this inclusion of the reader's subjectivity into his and his process of Othering: 'I carry them, men and women, I carry them with me wherever I go'[12]. However, this does not (as yet) lead to a 'we'. Men and women, referred to in the third person, are comprised within the speaker on the grounds that he says so. The reader, too, is comprised within the speaker in terms of form, rather than content. This becomes confusing as Whitman uses the same word, 'you', to 'Other' the objects surrounding him and to include the reader. It is only at the end of Section 6 that Whitman addresses the reader with his familiar and emotionally intimate apostrophe, allowing them to find a clearer position in the poem:

> Only the kernel of every object nourishes;
> Where is he who tears off the husks for you and me?
> Where is he that undoes stratagems and envelops for you and me?[13]

These sections of 'Song of the Open Road' illustrate how Whitman's 'you' as a deictic word affects the right hemisphere of the reader's brain. The pronoun pushes the reader to use their capacity of abstraction, imagination, and sense of space with relation to the speaker and in the poem. Whereas deixis indicates the need for previous specification, Whitman navigates the pronoun and the possibilities it offers by eschewing descriptions or specifications. As James Nolan notes, Whitman's 'you' and 'I' are always in transformation, adapting to different

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objects and situations.[14] The meaning of the apostrophe changes, affecting the reader even before they are called forth personally, in an exchange which grows in intensity. Ultimately, the last line of the poem celebrates the emergence of a 'we' of (wished for) absolute, eternal boundedness: 'Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?'.[15]

Another feature which may be noted in 'Song of the Open Road', and which theories of cognitive poetics relate to divergence, is abstraction. Tsur connects abstraction and abstractness with space perception, noting that these features enhance the feeling of the suspension of boundaries and arouse lowly-differentiated, non-conceptual perceptions[16]. Section 5 of the poem abounds in abstract nouns and concepts which are, once more, deictic but not previously specified. Examples from this extract of lines include 'the holds that would hold me', 'where I list', and 'the east and the west':

> From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,
> Going where I list, my own master total and absolute,
> […]
> Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.
> I inhale great draughts of space,
> The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.
>
> I am larger, better than I thought,
> I did not know I held so much goodness.[17]

These lines are vague because of lack of specification and description: the speaker is 'large' and 'good', inhaling 'space', moving towards an unspecified direction, and free from something that would otherwise have held him. They rely on abstraction, emotions, unlimited perceptions of space, and integrated perceptions of concepts. What Whitman says, however, may be understood on an intuitive level.

What makes these lines, and much of the poem, especially abstract is the lack of description and specification which deictic words require. The reader needs to rely on their imagination and liberation from stable visual perceptions in order to understand how the speaker is, for instance, large and good. The space of the poem also remains highly abstract. It seems to be, like the speaker, 'loos'd of limits and imaginary lines', presenting a mere

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indication of the four cardinal points: it seems to extend without limits. Indeed, the road emerges, by Section 13, as a metaphorical road:

> Allons! to that which is endless as it was beginningless,
> To undergo much, tramps of days, rests of nights,
> To merge all in the travel they tend to, and the days and nights they tend to,
> Again to merge them in the start of superior journeys,
> To see nothing anywhere but what you may reach it and pass it,
> To conceive no time, however distant, but what you may reach it and pass it,
> […]
> To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls.[18]

Whitman reiterates the idea of an infinite, non-concrete space through his repetition, throughout the poem, of the word 'open' in the phrase 'the open road', which constitutes a paradox in that roads cannot be open, as they are characterized by their delimited layout. The metaphor of the road constitutes then a bridge between Whitman's formal arrangements and Whitman's meaning in terms of abstractness and spirituality.

These examples of deixis and abstraction provide an insight into Whitman's formal organization of the space of the poem and the resulting affectivity. The poet's use of deictic pronouns, which has been noted as uniquely instrumental in determining the reader's place in the poem, further relates to the dynamics of contact which Whitman construes. The audacious intimacy which the speaker creates with the reader comes from the first person's longing towards the 'you', the unknown (and future) reader, the 'stranger', the physical and metaphysical Other. This hunger for contact also gives shape to Whitman's poetry.

Scholars have noted that the space between the reader and the speaker is where the poem takes place;[19] there, Whitman aims to transform the reader. This space is dynamic and electric, like the bodies which the poet celebrates in his poetry (as in 'I Sing the Body Electric'). Donald Pease remarks that, perhaps, Whitman employs sexuality to exemplify his desire for an intense union with the reader, noting that this eroticism is one of the ways in which the poet channels his subjectivity in an exchange with the reader[20]. Whitman's reaching out can be traced back to more than sexual fantasies or communication. Significantly, the sensual bodies which he sings as 'electric' are, ultimately, manifestations of the soul, as the last line of the poem reveals: 'O I say now these are the Soul!'.[21]

Through both form and content, Whitman foregrounds this erotically and spiritually charged space between speaker and reader. Reading Whitman comprises more than the usual entrance into the space of the text on the part of the reader; it entails the leave-taking of the speaker from the pages. 'So Long!' (1860), one of the concluding poems in the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1860), reminds the reader, with intimacy, that literature and the pages of the book are not meant to be the speaker's residence:

> My songs cease, I abandon them,
> From behind the screen where I hid I advance personally solely to you.
>
> Camerado, this is no book,
> Who touches this touches a man,
> (Is it night? are we here together alone?)
> It is I you hold and who holds you,
> I spring from the pages into your arms.[22]

These lines employ an intimate tone to affect the reader: they are flattering, teasing, and affectionate. 'Everything passes through me, even you', the speaker seems to sing throughout the collection of poems, concluding: 'Everything can pass through you too, even me'. The fact that Whitman prepares, formally, the ground for an exchange between speaker and reader suggests that what happens there is an essential purpose of his poetry. Affectivity emerges as perhaps the most fundamental of Whitman's aims.

Notably, Whitman often remains mysterious or unspecified in his role as speaker. However, the speaking voice of *Song of Myself* provides some biographical details which allow for an identification with Walt Whitman. For instance, editions following the first one figure this line which emphasizes the native roots of the poet in the United States,[23] 'Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same'[24]. This is followed by the similarly autobiographical 'I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin, Hoping to cease not till death'.[25] Vincent Bertolini notes that Whitman continuously tempts the reader to identify himself, the poet, as the speaker of the poem, only to continuously deflect those identifications and determine his existence somewhere between the speaking voice and the reader.[26] This process would pertain to an ethical and political rhetoric according to which the author would bring the reader to realize both poem and speaker through their own participatory

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agency.[27] This suggestion would support the idea that the main purpose of Whitman's poetry is affectivity. The *Chants Democratic* cluster version of 'Poets to Come', published as 'Chants Democratic 14' (1860), exemplifies an expectancy on the part of the speaking voice towards the future readers, one which is social and ethical:

> Poets to come!
> Not to-day is to justify me, and Democracy, and what we are for,
> But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known,
> You must justify me.
>
> Indeed, if it were not for you, what would I be?
> What is the little I have done, except to arouse you?
>
> I depend on being realized.[28]

The speaker therefore coincides not with Walt Whitman, but with an expanded or composite entity which encompasses the reader as well. The reader needs to embody and actuate the poem, and therefore also the speaker's social ideals: the dependency between the 'I' and the 'you' is also moral and political. By the end of the poem, the speaker appears to declare the reader the unofficial speaker of his poetry, as he will be complete when they enact his vision:

> I am a man who, sauntering along, without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you,
> and then averts his face,
> Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
> Expecting the main things from you.[29]

This results in what Bertolini names a compounded self, made of both speaker and reader, which is both abstract and physical, excitable.[30] If the speaker is a compound, it follows that he cannot be considered complete or completely known (or knowable). The reader needs to contribute to the completion of the speaker. Furthermore, Whitman remarks that it is not possible for the reader to know him by simply reading his words. This may suggest a deflection of the possibility of biographical knowledge through poetry, a refusal to be defined as mere speaker, or a refusal to be defined at all. These suggestions may be simultaneously valid. 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand' (1855) confronts these matters, 'I am not what you supposed, but far different'.[31] It may be said that the speaker is now the Other:

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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!
Already you see I have escaped from you.[32]

The reference to 'leaves', the pages of *Leaves of Grass*, hints at the collection from a literary, and consequently intellectual, point of view. The attempt to thus understand the book would be futile, which is supported by the content of the rest of the poem: the speaker suggests that the reader carries his book in contact with their body, under their clothes – 'Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or rest upon your hip'[33] – or outside, in nature – 'For in any roof'd room of a house I emerge not, nor in company, And in libraries I lie as one dumb, a gawk, or unborn, or dead'[34]. The opposition between the open space of nature and the enclosed room is familiar, as noted in 'Song of the Open Road'. The speaker therefore shows a refusal to be understood through analysis: an exchange on a different level needs to happen between speaker and reader which opens the space to a non-intellectual, embodied knowledge.

'Being translated' is a recurring trope in *Leaves of Grass*. The conclusion of 'So Long!' presents a compelling use of this trope, which supports Bertolini's conception of the speaker as both a physical entity, presenting a body which excites and is excitable, and a purely abstract entity[35]. In the compounded self of speaker and reader, the speaker tends to take on disembodied, invisible, and impalpable dimensions, and the reader tends to grow in physicality, agency, and compactness[36]. This process may be compared to the death of the speaker and the rebirth of the reader:

Dear friend whoever you are take this kiss,
I give it especially to you, do not forget me,
I feel like one who has done work for the day to retire awhile,
I receive now again of my many translations, from my avataras ascending, while others doubtless await me,
An unknown sphere more real than I dream'd, more direct, darts awakening rays about me, *So long!*
Remember my words, I may again return,
I love you, I depart from materials,

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I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead.[37]

The author therefore imagines a formal death of the speaker in order to stimulate the reader to embody his poems and bring them to life. The author's message is both spiritual, social, and moral. Formally, Whitman has prepared the ground for this communication by rendering his poetry emotional, affective, and abstract. These features allow Whitman's poems, as theories from cognitive poetics illustrate, to be easily understood by the right hemisphere of the brain, which hosts emotions, mystical and spiritual experiences, the sense of orientation in space, and simultaneous, integrated concepts and perceptions which require less intellectual and linguistic processing. Through his second-person writing, Whitman makes the reader place themselves in different manners in the space of the poem: comprising them in the speaker's consciousness, or Othering them, or approaching them with an expectancy which needs them to, indeed, become a new speaker.

Ultimately, the space of the poem extends between the speaker and the reader; this is a liminal space, which requires participation and presence from both parts. Whitman employs abstractness, formally and in terms of content, in order to make his poems more affective and expand both the space of the poem and the imagination of the reader. Whitman's free verse and long lines reach out like a hand, with centrifugal energy, contributing to an entrancing poetic experience. These lines, related to the 'systems' of the universe, may equally refer to Whitman's long lines, 'Wider and wider they spread, expanding, always expanding, Outward and outward and forever outward'; 'All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses'[38]. In *American Beauty* (1948), Stephen Tapscott identifies Whitman's spatial expansion in and of the space of the poem as the first example in a larger American tradition:

> The journey on the open road that Whitman proposes at his most expansive is the same route as the journey inward […] This Whitmanian tradition thus defines the motion of the poem as a search for an appropriate form: the new poem will invent both a new giant Self and a place for that Self to inhabit[39].

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Notes

[1] Tom Abba et al., *Ambient Literature*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 1.
[2] Reuven Tsur, 'Cognitive Poetics and Speaking the Unspeakable', p. 1. https://www.tau.ac.il/~tsurxx/Chinese%20lecture.pdf.
[3] Tsur, p. 6.
[4] Tsur, p. 6.
[5] Tsur, p. 11.
[6] Reuven Tsur, 'Deixis and Abstraction: Adventures in Space and Time', in *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, ed. by Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 41–45.
[7] Walt Whitman, 'Song of the Open Road', in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Gay Wilson Allen, New York: Penguin, 1980), pp. 136-44 (p. 136), ll. 1–3.
[8] Whitman, 'Song of the Open Road', p. 137, ll. 25–28.
[9] Stephen Railton, 'As If I Were with You', in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. by Ezra Greenspan, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 7–26 (p. 8).
[10] Railton, p. 9.
[11] Walt Whitman, 'To a Stranger', in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Gay Wilson Allen New York: Penguin, 1980, p. 122, ll. 1, 10.
[12] Whitman, 'Song of the Open Road', p. 137, l. 13.
[13] Whitman, 'Song of the Open Road', p. 139, ll. 88–90.
[14] James Nolan, *Poet-Chief: The Native American Poetics of Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda*, Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1994, p. 161.
[15] Whitman, 'Song of the Open Road', p. 144, l. 231.
[16] Tsur, 'Cognitive Poetics and Speaking the Unspeakable', pp. 8–10.
[17] Whitman, 'Song of the Open Road', p. 138, ll. 54–55, 58–62.
[18] Whitman, 'Song of the Open Road', p. 142, ll. 169–74, 183.
[19] Railton, pp. 7–26; Vincent Bertolini, '"Hinting" and "Reminding": The Rhetoric of Performative Embodiment in *Leaves of Grass*', *ELH*, 69: 4 (2002); Donald Pease, 'Blake, Crane, Whitman, and Modernism: A Poetics of Pure Possibility', *PMLA*, 96 (1981): p. 78. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24564767.
[20] Pease, p. 78.
[21] Walt Whitman, 'I Sing the Body Electric', in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Gay Wilson Allen, New York: Penguin, 1980, pp. 98–105 (p. 105), l. 165.
[22] Walt Whitman, 'So Long!', in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Gay Wilson Allen, New York: Penguin, 1980, pp. 382–84 (p. 384), ll. 51–57.
[23] Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli, footnotes, in Walt Whitman, *Foglie D'Erba*, ed. By Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli, Milan: BUR Rizzoli, 2013, pp. 60–61.
[24] Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, in *Foglie D'Erba*, ed. by Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli (Milan: BUR Rizzoli, 2013), pp. 60-236 (p. 60), l. 7.
[25] Whitman, *Song of Myself*, p. 60, ll. 8-9.
[26] Bertolini, p. 1048.
[27] Bertolini, p. 1048.
[28] Walt Whitman, 'Chants Democratic 14', ll. 1–7. https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1860/poems/18.
[29] Whitman, 'Chants Democratic 14', ll. 14–16.
[30] Bertolini, p. 1048.
[31] Walt Whitman, 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand', in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. By Gay Wilson Allen, New York: Penguin, 1980, pp. 114–15 (p. 114), l. 4.
[32] Whitman, 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand', p. 115, ll. 27–31.
[33] Whitman, 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand', p. 115, l. 22.
[34] Whitman, 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand', p. 114, ll. 15–16.
[35] Bertolini, p. 1048.

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[36] Bertolini, p. 1053.
[37] Whitman, 'So Long!', p. 384, ll. 64–71.
[38] Whitman, *Song of Myself*, pp. 216, 78, ll. 1185–86, 129.
[39] Stephen Tapscott, *American Beauty: William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Whitman*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 66.

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——, ‘Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand’, in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Gay Wilson Allen. New York: Penguin, 1980. pp. 114–15.