

>> So, Walt Whitman's Song of Myself is in 52 ah, sections, I call them cantos. Ah, and there's no way that we can do just, do all 52 with the time we have. But, but I thought it would be good for us to try and understand Walt, particularly in the context of Emily Dickinson. These are two proto-modernists. They're heading toward breaking the rules of conventional, official verse culture of the 19th century. Formerly, they're doing very different things, but they're somewhat equally breaking the rules. And ah, but Walt does it in a very different way. So, let's, let's start right from the beginning. The first two lines, I celebrate myself and sing myself, and what I assume you shall assume. What's positive, and happy and good Max, about that before we get to the doubts about it. What's so great about it? >> It's ah, it's full of self esteem. It's, it's ah, it's about himself. It's about being proud of, of who he is and ah, and what he thinks and celebrating that. Celebrating his, his being a human being. >> And it's about the I's, it's about the first person pronoun which is given romantic poetries allowance for the I. Not completely new but it's perhaps new in it's emphasis. This is about him. This is, this is essentially a verse journal, really. A verse diary. I celebrate myself and sing myself. Sing, anybody want to comment on sing? Ann Maris? >> Um, it seems since minstrels. It seems like an epic. It's supposed to be an epic of the self rather than um, a legendary hero. >> And singing as opposed to talking or writing. >> Mm-hm. >> It's kind of like exuberance like impulse than in singing. >> In association with poetry in it's original state maybe. The singing, the bardic, the lyric. >> The ballad. >> And the lyre. Christine? >> It's more of a ballad type thing. >> Although the form is not a ballad. >> It's not a ballad in form. >> Balladeering I guess, is what you mean. >> Yeah. >> Okay. The downside. I celebrate myself and sing myself and what I assume, you shall assume. What an audacious thing for him to say. Allie, where do we start with that? And what I assume, you shall assume. There's a positive and a negative there. >> Um, well, the negative is well, you know, according to Hugh like what gives you the right to assume what I would assume. >> Assume is a really. >> Um. >> Interesting word in this context, right? Assumptions, basic assumptions. We assume the same things. >> Well, assume could also mean like, like, to make an assumption would be like, I think this about something but to assume something could also mean that you're kind of like, sort of, put it on or like take it in or, you know, it doesn't necessarily mean like, to make an assumption about someone like, you can also like assume a certain attitude or. >> As you are assuming a position. >> Sure thing. >> Right. So, there's assuming a position of when you are talking about, whoa, this is sort of omnisexual. There's a certain positioning that's, that's

exciting for him and the decision that he has as the writer in connection to you as
the reader is, it's somewhat sexualize and so, there is an, assuming a position.
And
the position he assumes is the same position that you show us. So, then I
loafe and invite my soul. I always found this when I was first studying Whitman.
Just, it tickled me to think of someone giving himself license or permission
to invite himself as if to say, do you really need. Does the self need
permission to do something for the self? I invite myself, my soul. I learn and
loafe, etc. I, now 20, 37 years old, in perfect health begin. Lovely. Begin,
this is the birth of the subject, not the birth of the person or the man. The
birth
of the subject, of the writing subject, of the language itself. Okay, let's look
at
the end of section one. I harbor for good and bad. I permit to speak at every
hazard, nature without check with original energy. Let's talk about the phrase
original energy. Anybody have a thought about the way the word original works
there? Kristen, your thought? >> Um. >> Original. >> Original in that, it's ah,
it's um. >> What kind of originality?
Let's talk about. >> The origin. >> Origin, meaning birth. >> It's natural. >>
It's natural. Original.
Um, originality. First, unique, legitimate, original, the first, the real thing.
Right? But also original, originally, origins, bardic, singing, back to basics.
Original
energy. I'm returning poetry to it's expressive origins, I guess he's saying.
Okay. Now we go canto 2 or section 2. And in this section, houses and rooms are
full of
perfumes. There's an internal rhyme. The shelves are crowded with perfumes. I
breathe the fragrance myself and I know and I like it the distillation would
intoxicate me also, intoxicate me also but I shall not let it. The atmosphere is
not a perfume. It has no taste of the
distillation. Later, the sound of the belched words of my voice loosed to the
eddies of
the wind. So, he seems to be okay with perfumed room, rooms but he seems to be
better
out in the air. The sound of the belched words. So, would you think of Emily
Dickinson as offering us belched words? >> [laugh] >> Never. >> So what is
belched, what, what are belched words? The
belched words of my voice loosed to the eddies of the outdoor air. The
atmosphere, the unscented
atmosphere. What is he trying to say? Emily, where does he stand? What position
is he taking and what is air have to do with poetry? Any of those things. >>
Well, belching words is inherently very artless and belching is something that
is like naturally inarticulate and to
express yourself verbally and by means of an inarticulate sound is a kind of. >>
A barbaric yelp. A howl. This is going to be very influential. So, this the an,
this is the
unaesthetic, aesthetic. This is the supposedly natural voicing of the body.
Yeah, Dave you were going to say something. >> That it's also unrestrained.
Belch sometimes happen momentarily. >> Unrestrained, it's unconstrained.
Formally as well. The long lines, the repetition, the seeming prosaic style.
Air, breathing, respiration, inspiration. So, there's a relation
between original, original writing, original poetics and the belch words
loosed, not constrained but loosed to the eddies of the wind. You shall no
longer take things

at second or third hand, he says at the end of canto 2. You shall no longer take things at second or third hand nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books. Uh-oh. He's really outdoors now. What's he saying and how do you feel about it? >> I think, the really direct response to Emerson. And ah, in Emerson's speech The American Scholar, he says that like, Americans can no longer look to what people before us have written and said. Like you should read and you should, you should be educated but it's, it's time now for, for Americans to make their own cultural stand. Make their own cultural contributions. And I think Whitman's really responded to that. >> Yeah, it's like primary experience going out there and doing it for yourself instead of relying on and looking through a window and someone else doing it like Emily Dickinson might want to. >> So, firsthand experience is a guide to reality. This is ah, this is a Whitmanian hallmark. And this is going to become a problem throughout modern poetry when we get in Chapter 8 of this course to John Ashbery's poem, The Instruction Manual. He parodies this whole idea that first hand experience is a guide to, in this case, the town of Guadalajara. Where he, he, he boxed the idea that we can actually know something about Guadalajara and that these aren't words. In fact, what Walt has written here about second hand knowledge is second hand knowledge because it's words. And in fact, the specter of books is the leaves of grass, the book itself. So, there's all kinds of theoretical and possibilities with this naive um, eye experience and eye conveyed experience. But, we love it because he's trying to break free, as you were suggesting in a kind of transcendental way. Section 3, canto 3. I love this stanza. There was never any more inception than there is now. I want to ask you all what now means after this. There was never any more inception than there is now, nor any more youth or age than there is now, and will never be any more perfection than there is now, nor any more heaven or hell than there is now. Urge and urge and urge. Max, what does now mean? In this context. >> Well, now is, now is the poem. He is talking about. >> You went right to the, like bonus answer. >> [laugh] >> Right from like, can you give us a more prim, more primitive answer? >> Now would be the, maybe the time of his writing with the time of, of that's first hand experience. >> The progressive 19th century present which Whitman was very interested in and there's that progress, human progress, good, yeah. And now, you know your second level answer. >> Now is also the poem. [laugh] >> [laugh] >> And why do we say that? What is presence mean in writing and language? Well, if he's, if we're talking about this sort of paradox or theoretical impossibility of, of conveying his experience with words than his sort of, um, he's saying that, that the words here, this poem, this language is the experience. >> This is it? >> This is it.

>> There's never more, I love this, never any more inception, any more creativity, any more birthing, any more origins than there is right here as I write. In a way, that's the same self reference, referentially we see in Dickinson. That's the vis for occupation of this. Nor anymore youth or age. We don't look back. We don't look forward. What we do is we have this presence, the presence of this subjectivity, of this writer, of this Walt. If you want to look for me, look under your boot soles. I'm there, the leaves of grass, I'm always there, wherever you look I'm there. >> Um, maybe you're just going back to the meeting ah, or the scene that Anna pointed out. Um, maybe he's encouraging the reader to assume the body of the poem in that sense. So, that's sort undermining that statement. Neither he nor the readers assuming anything except for their embodied experience in the world and also in the poem. >> I like that. No assumptions. Um, I'm here, you're here. The division between reader and writer has disappeared now. That the writer is gone and what you have is a text that you absorb, and inception takes place right here. Now means here. It's presence, the presence of the writer. Urge and urge and urge. We think of urge as being the original creativity but in fact here, the urge is the urge to be here after you're no longer, the, the language itself. If we go to canto 5, there's a passage that's what I call meta-pedagogical. I'm very interested in meta-pedagogy. Meta-pedagogy is the inclusion of the idea of teaching. How something is taught in the thing itself and Walt likes to think of himself as a teacher. Loafe with me on the grass. Loose the stop from your throat. What the stop in your throat mean? Metaphorically, I hope there's no real stop but. >> Whatever is controlling your thoughts from getting out. So. >> Or preventing. >> Preventing you from saying what you want to say. >> And the notion of the voice. And in addition, it's lodge in the throat. The thing that won't let you full throttle to yop, to squeal, to use and kneel logism just to, or to listen to the world and say it. That kind of again naive notion of representation. Loafe with me on the grass. That's of course his theme, can see the leaves of grass. Loafe with me on the grass. Loose the stop from your throat, let it out vocally. Not words, not music or rhyme. Rhyme, what's wrong with rhyme? >> It's constraining. It's contraining. >> Whitmanian. Are you going to be Whitmanian for a second?>> Yes, it is. >> What's wrong with rhyme? >> That rhyme can often be a stop in the throat. That it can. >> It's a constraint, right? >> To prevent even what you actually want to say cuz you're like, I will, you know, this is an aviated rhyme. I have to like rhyme this so can't use the word that I really want to use cuz it didn't rhyme. >> So, the long line seemingly is the unstopping of the throat. Not rhyme, not music or rhyme I want. Not custom or a lecture. What? What's custom? What's custom has to

do with lecture? Dave? >> Lectures are given in a customary sense. It is a specific way of giving a lecture. It's a formulated way. >> So, what is the idea, what is the lecture as opposed to something else? What is it? What kind of conveyance of information is a lecture. What's behind it? What are the assumptions? >> That there is a speaker conveying something. >> Speaker and a listener. >> And a listener who is. >> Someone stands, other speak sit, someone speaks, others are quiet, someone knows, others don't, someone is, the others aren't yet. That's the custom of knowledge. It's also the custom subject-object relations. It's the custom of subject-speaker-object-reader. It's this custom of writer-reader and Walt is challenging that somewhat naively, exuberantly, seemingly sometimes. Challenging the notion that there is someone to tell you what you know. He really want to tell you who crawl inside your brain and your body and find out what you know and speak it for you. Ooh, it's a little creepy. Not custom or lecture, that's the meta-pedagogical moment. What we do when we read these poems together is we form a collaborative, collective close reading. And I have a feeling that if 10,000 people were to read this poem together and collectively interpret it, the interpretation would be better than if one person will do it in him or herself. Not custom or lecture, not even the best. Only the lull I like. Lull? The hum of your valved voice. Alright, so, lull. Only the lull, love this word. Only the lull. What's he referring to? >> I think he's referring to the present. Just the present moment. >> Just translate lull without, outside the poem. If I say, there's a lull. >> There's a pause. >> A pause, a quiet. >> It can also be a lull of qualities of someone's voice. >> Lulling. Yes, lulling someone to sleep. So, there's, there's ah, there's a kind of that of somnambulism of relaxation. A tranquilizing that takes place. This paradox despite all these exuberance, only the lull, I like. The loafing on the grass. In this is book, the leaves of grass. The leaves being the pages of the book. Right? The leaves of grass, only the lull I like. The hum of your valved voice. I almost want to say valved voice except that he wouldn't be happy with that. Valved voice? We've heard about the stop. Anybody do music stops. Right? The stops. Don't we, don't we describe the, on a wind instrument, the thing. >> Or an organ. >> Also in a stringed instrument. >> Or a trumpet you have the valves. >> Stops, has valves in stops. The hum of your valved voice. The valve is open. Yeah. So, let's ah, quickly look at 6, Section 6. Here can get into the grass and I really want to understand this. Or I guess, or I guess, I guess it must be the flag or my disposition or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord or I guess, or I guess. What's he doing in or I guess? >> And you're setting out, you know, there's, it could be so many different things and it's like he's kind of saying it over and over again to get at it many different ways. >> Many different ways. You know the, he's not at all stung in, he's not at all cubistic at all. And yet, his

willingness to try to get things right by repetition is very predictive of certain aspects of modern poetry, and of modernism generally. He's trying this angle. I've tried this, I've tried this. I guess it's like this. Leaves of grass, grass is such an open ended hieroglyphic. Such an open ended symbol. Grass, tell me about grass, quick. Off the top of your head, grass. >> Covers the entire world. >> Yes, everything is grass. Max, grass. >> It's ah, it's, it's small, it's, it's, it's everywhere. >> It's minor, it's common. >> And it's a little, little bits. >> But what. >> That become one big thing. Is it lies on it, does it lies on it? Does it actually attach on it cuz I don't have works but it's semi [inaudible]. >> Seat, right? >> And they put the scene to it. Anyway, there's something about grass that's kind of interconnected. It's true. I know what I'm talking about. >> [laugh] >> But what about, but what about, but it's a plant. He's reminding us that leaves the grass, grass actually has leaves. We, we mow it so we don't think of it as having leaves but, the American beauty rose is the rose, is the flower of the, of Andrew Carnegie, of, of, of the perfection clipping all the roses in order to get this one thing. It becomes an American symbol of excellence and capitalism. And, leaves of grass is the common, it's ubiquitous. It's really democratic. >> Grass roots, you know. >> Grass roots, exactly. We should have thought about that two minutes ago. Grass roots. So, leaves of grass, this poem, 52 sections, leaves of grass. Ah, well, 52 sections in Song of myself leaves of grass as a life-long project. So, we have leaves, leaves are the pages of the book and so, they are common. And there are series of guesses or I guess, or a guess attempting it all right and to make one poetry of everything for a lifetime. Or I guess, the grass is itself a child or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic, tell me about that. Uniform, hieroglyphic. >> Well, it's kind of a mystery that no man is privileged to. If it's a uniform hieroglyphic um, as supposed to a specific hieroglyphic. Not, not that's necessarily and usually. >> So, what's hieroglyphic means that were things. >> Um, well, yeah, a symbol. >> A symbol, keep going. We use it. >> Like a picture. >> Something that requires a ciphering. It's a code. It's a message but uniform? It's paradox isn't it? A uniform hieroglyphic, Kristen? >> Well, because all of the leaves of grass are supposed to be different. >> They're different but they are uniform so he's creating a common, a commonality of the many. The leaves a grass, uniform. One common meeting very much like Emily Dickinson whose gone proliferative meanings that do not get resolved. This is a uniform hieroglyphic, [unknown] out of the many, this is grass. One, the grass and it means sprouting the light in broad zones and narrow zones here and there, growing among black folks as among light. I like the stars in poetry, the grass is growing under those opposite sides of

segregation and the slavery. Growing among black folks and white folks, Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same. What's he saying? What's his politics? >> It's democratic. >> Democratic. Keep going. >> Um, well, as you just said from the many one, everyone is treated equally. >> Democratic, American, [unknown], equivalence, equality, multicultural. >> Liberal. >> Liberal, progressive in the sense that if it's inclusiveness, Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I love that. I gave them the same. They all get my leaves of grass. This is really in a way, well, I will argue this later with, in a way that opposite of Emily's selectivity, um, a visitor is the fairest. For Walt, a visitor is the uglier the better, the commoner, the better. The more diverse, the better. >> But they also, but you can also have a Congressman not being that. >> It's not slow. It's high and well, yes, exactly. Um, let's just spend a little more time before we break on Section 8, the blab of pave. Blab of the pave. The blab of the pave tires of carts, sluff of boot soles, talk of the promenaders, The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, back at the bus, back at the bus, I don't know what's he's doing, that guy. >> [laugh] >> Interrogating thumb, this seems to be a city, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor, hey can you hear that? The snow sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, [laugh] pelts of snowballs, hurrahs for popular favorites, the theater seems [inaudible]. Look, there's Brad Pitt, 19th century version. The fury of rouse mobs, The flap of the curtained litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital, The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows, there seems to be a fight in the middle of this. The excited crowd, the policeman with his star. I mean, let me through, let me through, cops here, look at, police are here. Step aside, step aside, working as passage to the center of the crowd, the pest of stones that receive and return so many echoes, What groans of overfed or half-starved who fall sunstruck or in fits, What exclamations of women taken suddenly who hurry home and give birth to babes, I won't try to do the sound of that. >> [laugh] >> Sound of that What living and buried speech is always vibrating here, here being city. Here being civilization. Here being society. This is not a nature poem. This is a poem about people gathered together tightly. What howls restrained by decorum. What living in buried speeches always, there's almost a notion of the unconscious buried speech is always vibrating here, what howls. There's the [unknown] word. There's the lineage of [unknown word. What howls restrained by decorum arrests slides adultery of offers, acceptance, and rejections. I mind them or the show or resonance of them and I come and I depart. This is a catalog. And when we continue, I want to talk about the implications of the catalog of the list. So, we'll do that.