

Canto 47, or section 47, of Song of  
Myself, I'm going to read it and then ask for your responses. I am the teacher  
of athletes. He that by me spreads a wider breast  
than my own proves the width of my own. He most honors my style who learns  
under it to destroy the teacher. The boy I love, the same becomes  
a man not through derived power, but in his own right. Wicked rather than  
virtuous  
out of conformity or fear. Fond of his sweetheart,  
relishing while his steak. Unrequited love or a slight cutting  
him worse than sharp steel cuts. First-rate to ride, to fight,  
to hit the bull's eye, to sail a skiff, to sing a song or  
play on the banjo. Preferring scars and the beard and faces  
pitted with small-pox over all latherers. And those well-tann'd to those  
that keep out of the sun. I teach straying from me,  
yet who can stray from me? I follow you, whoever you are,  
from the present hour. My words itch at your ears  
till you understand them. I do not say these things for a dollar or to fill up  
the time while I wait for  
a boat. It is you talking, just as much as myself,  
I act as the tongue of you. Tied in your mouth,  
in mine it begins to be loosen'd. I swear I will never again mention love or  
death inside a house. And I swear I will never  
translate myself at all, only to him or her who privately  
stays with me in the open air. If you would understand me,  
go to the heights or water-shore. The nearest gnat is an explanation,  
and a drop or motion of waves key. The maul, the oar,  
the hand-saw, second my words. No shutter'd room or  
school can commune with me. But roughs and  
little children better than they. The young mechanic is closest to me,  
he knows me well. The woodman that takes his axe and jug  
with him shall take me with him all day. The farm boy plowing in the field  
feels good at the sound of my voice. In vessels that sail, my words sail, I go  
with fisherman and seamen and love them. The soldier camp'd or  
upon the march is mine. On the night ere the pending battle  
many seek me, and I do not fail them. On that solemn night, it may be their  
last, those that know me seek me. My face rubs to the hunter's face when  
he lies down alone in his blanket. The driver thinking of me does  
not mind the jolt of his wagon. The young mother and  
old mother comprehend me. The girl and the wife rest the needle  
a moment and forget where they are. They and  
all would resume what I have told them. Amara's, any thought about anything? Get  
us started. >> Yeah, I was immediately struck  
by the line, no shutter'd room or school can commune with me. Because I think  
it really expresses  
the philosophy of education that he's evoking in this passage. Rather than  
learning that's  
confined to a space, or limited to a curriculum,  
he's really an advocate of exploratory, sort of raucous, even wicked play,  
and I really appreciate that. >> So  
Walt Whitman has a theory of education, or what we would call a pedagogy. Can  
you say in sum what you think that is? because I know we'll  
come back to that point. >> Yeah, I think he's saying  
that the key to democracy, or to democratic free independent thinking,  
is learning to think for yourself, and seeing authority figures not as  
authorities of knowledge or holders of knowledge, keepers of knowledge, but just

the key to developing that skill yourself. >> Great.  
Good way to start. Dave, your thought? >> I love that line too, but another one I'll point out is, wicked rather than virtuous out of conformity or fear. And I like that because the worst thing you can be is conforming. Or even if you're virtuous, if it's conforming out of fear, it's not authentic. So wicked can be good. The only important part of that is just being authentic. >> It's quite a reversal, in the 19th century or even now, to affirm wickedness and to be skeptical of virtue. How does that reversal play itself out in Whitman generally, or elsewhere in this canto? >> Well, his virtue is being authentic. To him, that's the most important thing. And it could be seen as a whole bunch of different things by anybody out there as unvirtuous, even unethical, as far as poetry is concerned. But that's not important to him, it's just being true to yourself. >> Let's together, before we turn to Anna for her point, let's together accumulate a list of reversals. So we have one here, wicked rather than virtuous. I'll add, and I mean this in quotes, ugly as opposed to beautiful in a conventional sense. You've got faces pitted with scars. >> Preferring scars, yeah. >> Exactly, okay, other reversals? Outdoors as opposed to indoors, school, especially. >> Right. Any others? >> I'd say ordinary men and women rather than elite students, academics. >> Good. Great, okay. We'll pick that up too, I'm sure. Anna? >> I really liked this bit in the parenthetical. It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you, tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd. >> We've seen that. >> I love it. >> Isn't that the barbaric yawp stuff, about how your tongue is loosened and? >> Right. >> I think it's that and I think it's also that, what I assume, you shall also assume, you know. >> From canto one, I think. >> Yeah, this kind of totality of Walt. And I like thinking about what Amarais said, too, about sort of displacing pedagogy as I lecture, you receive, it's also displacing poetry as I'm the poet with the gift, you are the receiver of the words. It's, you're speaking just as much as I'm speaking, you're writing this poem with me just by being out in the street and being out in the world. >> So this is a radical conception of the poet. Let's spell that out. I act as the tongue of you, means the role of the poet is what? >> Is I'm translating what I see and what I experience and who you are into this poem that we're reading. >> Good. Anybody else want to try to explain that? I act as the tongue of you. What is the role of the poet? Lily? >> Well, if you actually go to the next bit of that line, it's tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd. So it kind of means when he's saying that when you can't find the words to express something, maybe it's an emotion or something that you're feeling, it's the poet who's going to be able to talk in those moments where you're tongue-tied, literally and I guess figuratively. >> So the poet, if you're feeling a little

inhibited or square, I can loosen you. So the poet as conveyor or medium of what ordinary Americans would like to be able to say, I guess. Okay, great, thank you. Lily, your thought? >> Actually, the line I wanted to bring up is right under that one. It starts with, I swear I will never again mention love or death inside a house, but this concept of, I swear I will never translate myself at all, only to him or her who privately stays with me in the open air. >> I knew you were going to pick that one. >> [LAUGH] Really?

>> That's such a really important point. >> Yeah, it's kind of complicated. >> Can we have a little theorizing of it? Yeah, so, I swear I will never translate myself at all, I think means He's defining two different spaces, like, he's sort of doing that throughout the whole poem, I think. So there's inside a house versus open air, and so I think he's saying, I'll never express myself so that you can understand me inside a house. I'll never translate myself so that I can be read that way. I only want to be read in the open air, or understood in the open air. >> So that was great, and I want to push a little harder and ask you to explain what kind of translation. What is translation in this sense? >> Well, when we think generally about translation, we think moving something from one language into another. So here, I guess, he's talking about the kind of translating that you do when you have an idea and you want to put it into words. >> Mm-mm. >> So, the difference between just thought and poetic expression maybe. >> Maybe rejecting or resisting poetic diction and poetic form. That would have been- >> Okay. That's one aspect of it. It reflects an idea of transparency. Language is, I will present it as it comes from either inside or from you. So if you have something to say, I will speak it for you, but the medium does not do anything to it. Right? It's not a translation but a kind of equivalence or something like that. Does that make any sense? Yeah, Amaris, you were going to say something? >> Yeah, because I guess generally when you ask me to translate something for you, it's to render it clearer or to say it another way that's more understandable, simpler. And he's refusing that, he's giving you the truth or the tongue listening tools, I guess. >> [LAUGH] >> Yeah. >> In as complex a way as he wants. >> Yeah. So this goes against something that becomes really important in ModPo. In ModPo, we move from what we think of as naive concepts of transparency and non-translation into accepting, at the very end of the course, that everything is in some ways a translation. And that transparency is impossible. The Beats, in the later chapter on the Beats, the Beat poetry, some of them seem to, like Ginsberg sometimes, Kerouac sometimes, in his concept of spontaneity, seems to imply that he's not altering things. He's not translating what he feels or what he sees in America. So Walt is participating in a kind of faux naivete. But there's something to be said at the end-end of the course. The notion that text as it's given or trying to redeliver an ambient language, that is a kind of non-translation. And also the ultimate respect of someone, an ordinary American here, of a soldier about to go into a civil war battle the next morning, needs someone to represent him or her. Him, in this case. Needs someone to speak,

and Walt is saying, I'm not going to be a fancy poet and translate. I'm just going to get your words out there so people know. Camara Brown, hi. >> Hi. >> Welcome. >> Thanks for having me. >> Yeah, this is cool, a new TA, and we are in the Wexler Studio, for people who miss the Arts Cafe, which is our usual place. And so this is like, all kinds of cool new things. We like change. Anyway, Camara, your thought on any of this? >> My thought kind of goes in with what we were talking about in translation. When he talks about, the line I want to talk about is, if you would understand me go to the heights or water-shore, the nearest gnat is an explanation. >> Mm-hm, great line isn't it? >> Oh, it's beautiful. >> The nearest gnat is an explanation, what does that mean? >> Well, I'm thinking about what he's talking about in terms of learning and understanding and comprehending. Right? And it's a little ironic because if you would understand me, go and find a gnat. Right? If you know what I'm saying, be there, experience. And that's what I think he's trying to say in terms of how to learn, how to understand, how to comprehend, is presence. It's being in the places that you are, and that's through the whole poem, when he's talking about the workers working with their hands and being in nature, it's all about being absorbed with your environment. >> Good point. We always think of language as not a doing and not an experience. Walt seems to be reconceiving of language as participating in the work. First of all, does that appeal to you, Camara, but secondly, is it possible, it good that language can be part of the world, or should it be separated, or? >> Well, I think that every time you're in a poem, this poem is so meta, right? Like you're the teacher and the student, and you're learning, and you're outdoors, and you're indoors. But all within this poem, right? And so I think in some ways, he's making it easy for you not to work within the poem, because you can just slide in. Not like Dickinson, which I am a little a more into. >> So you're really a Dickinsonian. What about the Whitmanian appeals to you? It sounds like a lot of it appeals to you. >> In some ways, I like how enveloped he is, right? And I like how the understanding is experiential and it's just really reading and being there in the poem. >> Mm-hm. >> But. >> But. >> There's something about teasing out a Dickinson poem and finding the layers. >> Doing the work. >> Doing the work, yeah. >> In a way, as you pointed it out a minute ago, but this is just repeating a really good point that you made, it seems like all the work is being done for you, but he's celebrating work, so there's a bit of a paradox. And your other point, which you didn't tease out all the way but it's implicit, is something Emily Dickinson might have said. Which is, well, you're in a room, you're in a poem, it's a poem. Like, you think you're outside of a poem, but you've written this. >> [LAUGH] >> Yes, yeah. >> You know, like, you need to be meta-meta. Okay, so what we're going to do now is, and it's going to be quick, just invite each of you again to respond to something, real quick point, or another point that you'd want people reading and thinking about canto 47 to just know. And then I'll make one final point and

we'll be done. Amaris, your extra thought? >> Oh, I love what Camara just said about how the essence of his poetry and his pedagogy is experiential learning. And I think that kind of her preference for Dickinson kind of illustrates what he says in the line, he most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher. >> Yeah.

[LAUGH] >> So that idea of- >> Camara would be that, the critique she waged would be exactly what Walt, he's hegemonic. Because it gets it both ways. He gets to enable Camara to destroy Walt in order to do another thing or something like that. >> [LAUGH]

>> Great teacher. Yeah. >> So, I mean, yeah, he doesn't fear his own annihilation because it's really his spirit that he wants to convey to future generations. >> Go ahead, annihilate me. I'll be Walt. Look for me under your boot soles. >> [LAUGH]

>> Tread on me. Go ahead, tread on me. All right, cool. Dave, last thought? >> I swear I will never mention love or death inside a house. That just reminds me of Emily Dickinson's house of possibility, a fairer house than prose. And Walt is saying, my house of possibility is prose. >> Yeah, it's a great point of contrast between the two. Yeah, very cool. Anna? >> I keep getting pulled toward this education pedagogy piece, especially when we think about he's de-centering himself as poet while he's also being the writer of the poem. He teaches straying from me, yet who can stray from me, because my words are going to keep itching in your ears, and you're going to keep thinking of them as you're out in the world doing your worldly things. Yeah.

>> You think you're done with me as a teacher, but I'm always like [NOISE]. >> [LAUGH]

>> I'm always the gnat in your ear, like, get rid of this guy, he's driving me crazy. Lily? >> Well, on the same vein though, this poem for me brings up the elements of Song of Myself that feel a little creepy. >> [LAUGH]

>> Like, the soldier camped or upon the march is mine. >> He really is clear on that one. >> I just think that there's a lot of, I don't know how comfortable I am with this idea of possessing all these maybe more working class than Walt people, people really involved in trades. And sort of like, that person is mine, or that Walt is sort of in all of their subjectivities and understanding them. >> He's being a war nurse, both literally and poetically. And he's also assuming that everyone needs nursing. Yeah?

And that the worst part of nursing is you need me, I'm here to heal you. It's very presumptuous. And creepy is a word I think we've used before. You want to elaborate that just a little? >> Yeah. Well, creepy, I mean this concept of possessing. It betrays a little, so he's saying that he's your tongue, he's going to help you express what you're saying. But then when we get to the soldier's mind, kind of betrays like, it's not just that he wants to help you express something. There's actually maybe something more to it, like whatever there is between just expressing and possessing. >> And we haven't really, we've been very chaste in this conversation. There is a incredible sexuality,

by incredible I mean emphatic sexuality, here that goes along with what you might call creepy. Which is to say, Walt's words crawl into your mouth and loosen up your tongue. I mean, it's a very invasive kind of strategy. >> [LAUGH]

>> And we can only have one or two teachers like this in our career as students. >> Good point.

>> [LAUGH] >> Because if they're all like this, you're just overwhelmed. And despite that he really wants you to think for yourself, you can't do anything but parrot what he says because he's your medium. Kamara, follow that. You got another thought?

>> On the vein of creepy, gender is interesting in this poem. The men seem to be able to work with their hands and be in the outdoors. But the women, the young mother and old mother, the girl and the wife, are always in terms of motherhood and domesticity. >> Well, they rest the needle, they're sewing, probably indoors actually, yeah. >> Yeah, and forget where they are in the sewing. I don't know how I feel about that, but it's something that I'm questioning a little. >> They and all would resume what I have told them. So, the women pause for a minute while they're trying to, who's this Walt guy, what are we doing? And then they go back to work because he's told them what to do or he's told them how to be, something like that. Yeah, I mean, Walt creates these mixed feelings, very powerful ones. My point is simply to follow up on the pedagogy. I think there is an erotics of pedagogy here, that at its worst or at its creepiest, to use Lily's term, is, you think I'm liberating you, but I'm always going to be under your boot soles. There's a kind of egoless ego that may be typical of charismatic teachers. I am the teacher of athletes, and when as a coach I enable this athlete to run a race faster or to get to second base more effectively than I do, he was a real baseball fan, Walt was, then suddenly I succeed because you're faster or better or stronger than I am. That's a wonderful notion of a poet starting the modern period, saying, eh, get. And Emily is more of a show not tell type. Walt is more of a tell type. >> [LAUGH]

>> But Emily is not going to pretend to create successor poets who are better than she is, though this has happened. And I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me, is exactly the paradox of great teaching. Which is, I want you to take these ideas and go with them. But I'm always going to be there because the lesson is so great. So in the 19th century, this is a very liberating idea that we should be in the school of the great American outdoors and that we should all have experience and that we're going to learn from ordinary people. But Walt is our guide, and as has been pointed out, he's still in the poem.