

Posthuman Imagination in the Later Poems of Walt Whitman

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Synopsis

D.H. Lawrence once referred to Walt Whitman as “mechanical” and “superhuman,” comparing him to a steam locomotive. He also states that matter, machines, and animals are fundamentally different from human beings. However, in the current era, when traditional binaries such as human/nature, human/animal, creature/machine, and man/woman are becoming extremely unstable, Lawrence’s insinuation, which is based on traditional humanism, no longer functions as irony. With the rapid twenty-first-century advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, and information technology, it is theoretically possible for humans to merge with machines and become superhumans. In this sense, Whitman—not Lawrence—accurately predicted the social changes taking place in the present. In this essay, I discuss Whitman’s “To a Locomotive in Winter” (1876) to demonstrate how Whitman, sometimes while employing a queer gaze, adopted the steam locomotive as a tool to augment his body in his later years. This essay examines how Whitman’s experiences in the Civil War and his subsequent experiences of stroke, paralysis, and being cared for affected his queer, posthuman imagination, which extended his physical functions through the locomotive, a form of transportation technology.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, “To a Locomotive in Winter”, “Passage to India”, Posthumanism.

1. Introduction

In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D.H. Lawrence playfully refers to Walt Whitman as “mechanical” and “superhuman,” comparing him to a steam locomotive. He also states that matter, machines, and animals are fundamentally different from human beings (172). However, in the current era, when traditional binaries such as human/nature, human/animal, creature/machine, and man/woman are becoming extremely unstable, Lawrence’s insinuation, which is based on traditional humanism, no longer functions as irony. With the rapid twenty-first-century advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, and information technology, it is theoretically possible for humans to merge with machines and become superhumans. In this sense, Whitman—not Lawrence—accurately predicted the social changes taking place in the present.

The subject of technology in *Leaves of Grass* has received sustained critical attention. It is generally recognized that postbellum Whitman adopted an ambivalent attitude toward technology.¹ Although I generally agree with this opinion, in this essay, I discuss Whitman's "To a Locomotive in Winter" (1876) to demonstrate how Whitman, sometimes while employing a queer gaze, adopted the steam locomotive as a tool to augment his body in his later years. In this essay, I will examine how Whitman's experiences as a "Wound-Dresser" in the Civil War and his subsequent experiences of stroke, paralysis, and being cared for affected his queer, posthuman imagination, which extended his physical functions through the locomotive, a form of transportation technology. Meanwhile, I also explore the potential for connecting this imagination to the concerns of the twenty-first century.

2. Technology in Whitman's Antebellum Works

As Leo Marx pointed out over half a century ago, Whitman was a poet who featured technological innovations and inventions in his poetry more prominently than his contemporaries (245). In an 1856 letter to Emerson, he referred to new inventions, such as the telegraph, steamship, and locomotive, as examples of "resistless splendid poems." In addition to incorporating new technologies into his poems, he especially harnessed new developments in printing and photographic technologies. That is, his experience and knowledge as a printer and typesetter, the rapid development of new technologies, and advances in the distribution of printed material in the early nineteenth century enabled him to elaborately plan, print, and publish the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* as a copy of the poet himself (Reynolds 45).

Similar to how contemporary people create social media avatars to communicate with people far away, Whitman tried to make contact with his readers/lovers via the first edition of his own avatar. The opening lines of "A Song for the Occupations," which were deleted later, are worth citing as an example of a poem that uses the terminology of printing technology and reveals the impact of technology on the author-reader relationship.

COME CLOSER TO ME,
Push close my lovers and take the best I possess,
Yield closer and closer and give me the best you possess.

This is unfinished business with me. . . .how is it with you?
I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us.

I pass so poorly with paper and types. . . .I must pass with the contact of bodies and souls.

Here, Whitman dreams of direct, physical contact with the reader/lover, who holds and reads the book of

poems as the alter ego of the poet. However, as *Walt Whitman Encyclopedia* and Paul Gilmore (156) point out, the poet and the reader are separated by “the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between” them. In other words, it is the printing technology that frustrates Whitman’s erotic desire for physical contact with the reader. Simultaneously, it is also printing technology that makes it possible for Whitman to make contact with the body of others by transplanting his body and soul into the text of the poem, which is impossible in reality. That is, Whitman reveals already in the first edition the contradictory, dual tendency to overcome the alienating power of technology—which separates people from each other—with the help of technology itself.

This tendency is also observable in the second edition. In the ending of the poem that would later be titled “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman invokes the urban landscape of ferryboats, factory smokestacks, and rivers, claiming to “plant” them in parts of his body:

We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us,
 We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,
 You furnish your parts toward eternity,
 Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

Whitman’s imagination in this passage strongly reminds us of the fusion of man and machine—which, in the present day, is called bodily extension or human extension. Although he does not mention the above cited passage, in *Romantic Cyborgs*, which discusses the posthuman aspects of nineteenth-century writers, Klaus Benesch argues that Whitman used technology as a material for his poetry, especially in his early works, and he cites printing and publishing technologies as examples. He then stresses Whitman’s “cybernetic posture” in the poet’s attempt to equate the authentic author of *Leaves of Grass* with the portrait on the front page, which is a reproduction of himself (59–62). Taking all this into account, Whitman’s substitution of his own body with technology in his book becomes much more plausible in today’s context, where the extension of the body by machines is no longer science fiction.

Whitman’s cybernetic imagination is also intertwined with his obsession with death and eroticism, which becomes especially pronounced in the third edition. In the third and subsequent editions, Whitman uses death to confront future readers, not his contemporaries. This attitude is clearly expressed in poems such as “So Long!”:

This is no book,
 Who touches this, touches a man,
 (Is it night? Are we here alone?)
 It is I you hold, and who holds you,

I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth.

The phrase above the quoted passage “death making me undying” suggests that Whitman abandons contact with contemporary readers and aims to attain immortality as a material book via symbolic death. This act constitutes the transplantation of his own body and mind into the printed text. Whitman imagines that when future readers hold and read his book *Leaves of Grass*, he will be making physical contact with the reader across time and space and, at the same time, be reborn as a voice through the reader’s vocal cords. Printing technology of the time, with which he was familiar, enabled Whitman to dream of creating reproductions of his own body and soul—which today we call clones—escaping the limitations of time and space and transcending the human limitations of physical death. Whitman’s attempt to achieve immortality through the reproduction of himself in the form of a book in his early works seems in a way to foreshadow the advent of present-day biotechnology and bioinformatics.

The Civil War, however, changed Whitman’s attitude toward technology. At the military hospital where he visited his brother George, who was reportedly wounded in battle, Whitman saw “a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart” (*CPW*). It is not difficult to imagine that Whitman, who once spoke about the perfect body, was shocked by these scenes. In his biography of Whitman, David Reynolds points out that Whitman’s postwar writings reveal a division between “technology and humanism” (452). Benesch suggests that Whitman’s experience of the Civil War as “The Wound-Dresser,” which involved close contact with the amputation of soldiers’ limbs and victims of the modern technological warfare, contributed to his silence on the subject of technology (172–78).

It is possible that these traumatic war experiences drastically changed Whitman’s view of technology. Many soldiers had to have their limbs amputated during the Civil War, which was the first modern war, and this led to the subsequent improvement and development of prosthetic technology. The artificial limbs provided by the federal government to soldiers who had lost their limbs were designed by Frank Palmer and James Edward Hanger, and they were far more elaborate than the simple wooden pegs that had been used in the past. Although Whitman never directly mentions these artificial limbs, it is highly unlikely that Whitman, who nursed many soldiers with partially missing limbs, was unaware that artificial hands and feet were being rationed by the federal government. Even though Whitman was silent about technology after the Civil War, as Benesch argues, it is possible that during his nursing experiences, Whitman came to realize the necessity to rely on technology to replace or augment missing limbs and supplement bodily functions. It is more likely that, having seen many limb amputation in the Civil War and having experienced strokes and paralysis, Whitman actively relied on technology to experiment with body prosthetics in his work from middle age onward. It is impossible to fully substantiate these hypotheses. However, I would like to demonstrate that after the Civil War, Whitman regarded the steam locomotive as a supplement for his diminished bodily functions.

3. The Cane and Wheelchair as Queer Vehicles

Whitman suffered a stroke in January 1873 that left him paralyzed on the left side of his body; therefore, in many of his subsequent portraits, he can be seen using a cane. Whitman used several walking canes in his life, one of which was given to him by Peter Doyle, who had been his intimate companion since they met in 1865 (Murray 30). As another tool to help him travel, Whitman's friends bought him a wheelchair to celebrate his seventieth birthday (McLaughlin and Mullaney 1). Functionally, tools such as canes and wheelchairs help people move from one place to another and assist in human "locomotion," which is naturally related to the subject of steam locomotives and mobility.

In her essay on Whitman and the cane, Bethany Schneider elaborates on the social symbolism of the cane, suggesting that words that Whitman often used, such as "lean," "bend," and "support," had queer connotations (66). For example, Schneider introduces an anecdote in which Whitman, in his later years, recalls Doyle, his caregiver and lover, by associating him with his cane, writing, "'This cane was given [to] me by Pete Doyle,' . . . : 'Pete was always a good stay and support'" (Traubel, 1:415). Similarly, Whitman commented on the wheelchair given to him by his friends, writing, "[I]t was a wonderful true support" (Traubel, 5:170). Schneider also suggests the existence of a relationship between the act of leaning and the phrenology, to which Whitman was devoted. The area of the skull that corresponds to the phrenological term "adhesiveness," meaning comradeship between men, is located near the back of the head behind the temples. Schneider cites David Deitcher's account that, in the mid-nineteenth century, photographs of male friends sitting close each other with this area of the head drawn close together—that is, photos of men leaning on each other—were common (56). For example, phrases such as "the negligent leaning of their flesh against me as I sat" in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "a melodious echo, passionately bent for" in "So Long!" demonstrate the connection between the "adhesive" act of leaning and the queer imagination in *Leaves of Grass*, which contains additional instances of characters and readers in the poem leaning or bending over the book as a substitute for Whitman's body. Indeed, Whitman's queer gaze can sometimes be glimpsed in his references to these tools, which are equated with caregivers and assist with walking and mobility. In the next section, I will discuss the cane, wheelchair, and the steam locomotive; all three of these items serve as vehicles to extend Whitman's bodily functions and assist him in contacting others after his paralysis.

4. The Steam Locomotive as an Extension of the Body

Except for his references to steam locomotives in his antebellum poems and letters to Emerson, Whitman actually made fewer mentions of steam locomotives than is generally thought (Cronkite 170). Nevertheless, in "To a Locomotive in Winter," which was written in the winter of 1875 when he was still paralyzed, Whitman praised the mobility of the locomotive and presented it as an exceptional tool that could supplement the loss of physical function caused by paralysis. As he continued to recuperate at

Camden, he described his difficulties with his own health, particularly his ability to walk, in a manuscript dated August 1873:

“. . . my leg is as much paralyzed as ever, locomotion not entirely impossible, but very slow difficult after walking a couple of hundred feet then very stiff especially at the knee as if a bundle of strings and all drawn tight, to a hard knot—” (*Notebooks* 936)

While lamenting his diminished “locomotion” caused by the paralysis in his leg, he simultaneously describes the locomotive as an “emblem of motion and power”; this juxtaposition is a clear intentional choice by Whitman.

Phonetically speaking, “To a Locomotive in Winter” is carefully composed with onomatopoeic sounds that mimic the sound of a locomotive and alliterations and meters that seem to represent the massive movement of a locomotive as it begins to gain momentum and lurch forward (*Encyclopedia* 726).

THEE for my recitative,
Thee in the driving storm even as now, the snow, the winter-day declining,
Thee in thy panoply, thy measur'd dual throbbing and thy beat convulsive,
Thy black cylindric body, golden brass and silvery steel,
Thy ponderous side-bars, parallel and connecting rods, gyrating, shuttling at thy sides,
Thy metrical, now swelling pant and roar, now tapering in the distance,
Thy great protruding head-light fix'd in front,
Thy long, pale, floating vapor-pennants, tinged with delicate purple,
The dense and murky clouds out-belching from thy smoke-stack,
Thy knitted frame, thy springs and valves, the tremulous twinkle of thy wheels,
Thy train of cars behind, obedient, merrily following,
Through gale or calm, now swift, now slack, yet steadily careering;
Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent,
For once come serve the Muse and merge in verse, even as here I see thee,
With storm and buffeting gusts of wind and falling snow,
By day thy warning ringing bell to sound its notes,
By night thy silent signal lamps to swing.

In lines 1–12, all of which begin with a “th” sound, the frequent use of the onomatopoeic sounds “s,” “b,” and “f” mimics the sound of a locomotive blowing steam. In addition, the iambic repetition imitates the sound of a locomotive moving away and the reciprocating motion of its “parallel and connecting rods.”

The apostrophe “Fierce-throated beauty!” merges the throat, a part of the locomotive, with the poet’s throat. In this way, Whitman forms a single throat through the vibrations of the vocal cords and completes the imaginative mechanization of his body. By incorporating the sound of the locomotive into the poetic lines, Whitman supplements and expands his impaired bodily functions via his poetic imagination, which dreams of supplementing his feeble body with “motion and power.”

The visual depiction of the precise movements of individual parts of the locomotive in lines 1–17 is compared to a heartbeat with words like “beat,” “throbbing,” “pulse,” and “convulsive.” At the same time, the depiction of the massive locomotive is erotic and extremely phallic. In particular, the image of a “pennant” is also used in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and “Song of the Open Road.” Tomoyuki Zettsu, drawing on Viviane Pollack’s argument, also reads a phallic connotation in this word (131–32). Regarding the word “flag,” a synonym of pennant, it is notable that the term “sweet flag” is another name for the plant that appears as a phallic symbol of homoerotic comradeship in the Calamus cluster. In this way, queer desire and the urge to move are inextricably linked, and Whitman represents the locomotive as a part of his body—that is, he incorporates it into his poems as a technology that can supplement the abilities he has lost due to paralysis.

Despite not taking much interest in the locomotive previously, Whitman was motivated to represent the steam locomotive in a sensual manner not only because he wanted to compensate for his paralysis, but also because he saw the locomotive as a means to come into physical contact with the object of queer desire in his imagination. In a letter to Doyle, who at the time worked as a brakeman for the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, there is a passage that reads as follows:

The trains of the Camden & Amboy are going by on the track about 50 or 60 rods from here, puffing & blowing—often train after train, following each other—& locomotives singly, whisking & squealing, up the track & then down again—I often sit here & watch them long—& think of you. (*Correspondence* 271)

I amuse myself by seeing the locomotives, & trains go by—I see them very plainly out of the back window—they are only 7 or 800 feet off—they go by constantly—often one right after another—I have got used to them & like them—. (*Correspondence* 280)

It is significant that Whitman’s few references to locomotives are in letters to Doyle that were written about a year before Whitman wrote “To a Locomotive in Winter” because Doyle is associated with locomotives. In the poem, Whitman especially celebrates the public service provided by the locomotive, an “emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent,” while simultaneously attempting to benefit from the powerful drive of the locomotive by supplementing and expanding his bodily functions that were diminished by

paralysis to reach a lover/ reader who is implicitly assumed to be the destination of the journey.

5. Passages Connecting Humans with Machines and Nature

As I have shown, “To a Locomotive in Winter” is a personal poem, although it praises the public role of the locomotive as a “[t]ype of the modern—emblem of motion and power” that pulsates across the continent. In contrast, “Passage to India,” published in 1871, is an occasional poem, a public work written with the purpose of praising “the great achievements of the present.” In this poem, the triad of technological achievement, the poet, and the poetic passage present a vision that dissolves humankind’s alienation from nature that began with Adam and Eve’s expulsion from paradise:

Ah who shall soothe these feverish children?
Who justify these restless explorations?
Who speak the secret of impassive earth?
Who bind it to us? what is this separate Nature so unnatural?
What is this earth to our affections? (unloving earth, without a throb to answer ours, Cold
earth, the place of graves.)

.....
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook’d and link’d together,
The whole earth, this cold, impassive, voiceless earth, shall be completely justified,
Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish’d and compacted by the true son of God, the poet,
(He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains,
He shall double the cape of Good Hope to some purpose,)
Nature and Man shall be disjoin’d and diffused no more,
The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them.

Whitman believed that the completion of the transcontinental railroad, which linked “Europe and Asia,” would span the entire circumference of the earth. The poet begins by describing the sight and sound of the locomotive as it “overcome(s) all barriers,” as described in the passage below:

I see over my own continent the Pacific railroad surmounting every barrier,
I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte carrying freight and passengers,
I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-whistle,
I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the world,
I cross the Laramie plains, I note the rocks in grotesque shapes, the buttes,
I see the plentiful larkspur and wild onions, the barren, colorless, sage-deserts,

I see in glimpses afar or towering immediately above me the great mountains, I see the Wind
 river and the Wahsatch mountains,

.....
 Marking through these and after all, in duplicate slender lines,
 Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,
 Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,
 The road between Europe and Asia.

Beginning with the fifth line of the quoted passage above, the poet's perspective shifts to the locomotive, and the poem presents the American landscape from the point of view of the poet on the moving train. This shift in perspective allows the poet, from the same position as the train, to connect the American landscape with the "duplicate slender [poetic] lines" of the railroad, praising the railroad for forming a land route from Europe to Asia and performing the role of the poet, who imbues technological achievements with meaning. The word "passage" is a polysemous term that characterizes this work, as it refers primarily to lines of transportation, such as a railroads and waterways; media forms such as telegraph and locomotives; movement in time and space; and the text of the poem itself. To borrow from Marshall McLuhan's theory of media, every tool or medium, be it language, telegraph, or railroad, is an extension of the human being. In this work, Whitman identifies himself with the poetic text, the vehicle as a medium of communication and the railroad, the vehicle as a means of transportation; moreover, by extending and expanding himself, he dreams of a global village.

"Passage to India" is often criticized for its perceived undertones of imperialist expansionism; however, in recent years, critics such as Gilmore have emphasized the "techno-utopian" ideas contained in Whitman's post-Civil War poetry, which relies on technology to transcend time, space, and all differences (149–50). The idea of the poet as a "true son of God" who has immersed himself in the machine and bridges the gap between "Nature and Man" is, as Benesch puts it, "cybernetic," which might later lead to a technological utopia. Of course, such seemingly uncritical praise of technology, when viewed from today's perspective, naturally contains the logic of imperialist expansionism, and it is undeniably reminiscent of the development of industrial capitalism in the United States, where progress becomes an end in itself. However, if we consider the context of the twenty-first century, in which dramatic advances in biotechnology and information technology have blurred the boundaries between nature and human beings and organic life forms and machines, Whitman's imaginative attempt to overcome the gap between "nature and man" through technological achievements can be said to have predicted the ethical problems of our time.

6. Conclusion

Even before the Civil War, Whitman incorporated technology into his poetry, and sometimes, he portrayed technology as a barrier that distanced the poet from direct, physical contact with the reader. However, the prevailing view among scholars of Whitman is that the poet adopted a more ambiguous attitude toward technology after the war. Although I agree with this assertion, I also argue that Whitman's experience of the Civil War and the paralysis he subsequently suffered from led him to embrace transportation technology as a means of physical expansion and support, sometimes with a queer gaze. Considering recent breakthroughs in biotechnology, the poet's vision of technology complementing human bodily functions and bridging the gap between man and nature in "To a Locomotive in Winter" and "Passage to India" is increasingly relevant in the age of the Anthropocene. As I mentioned in the introduction, it was Whitman who predicted the modern, posthuman worldview rather than Lawrence, who criticized Whitman for being too "mechanical" from the perspective of traditional humanism. At the same time, however, Lawrence's assertion that Whitman was too mechanical is also relevant to the ethical problems we face in the present. The differences between their arguments not only confirms that the postmodernist problem of human alienation caused by technology is already embryonic in *Leaves of Grass*, but it also raises the question of how today's society, faced with various technological advances, should deal with ethical issues and how our perceptions of human beings, nature, and machines will change in the future. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, I believe that Whitman's theme can be closely examined by connecting it to other fields, such as posthumanism, environmental criticism, disability studies, and gerontology.

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Note

1. Reynolds notes that in the mid-1870s Whitman was "ambivalent about the technological, industrial America once he extolled," but at the same time, he points out the exceptional nature of "To a Locomotive in Winter" (512).

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