

Annotation #1

Walt Whitman's Lists

Reading Whitman's *Song of Myself*, you might begin to think that a single word—"and"—is the key to writing an expansive, ambitious poem. This ubiquitous "and" reminds us that much of *Song of Myself* is, essentially, a list: a list of qualities that Whitman is and is not ("tenacious, acquisitive, tireless"), a list of what he is doing ("I celebrate myself. . . I loafe. . . I assume"), a list of things that he has seen ("the pure contralto. . . the duck shooter. . . the quadron girl. . . the machinist"), and, importantly, a list of questions ("Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems? . . . Who need be afraid of the merge? . . . How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?"). All of which prompt a question: How does a list become a poem? Is any list—of groceries, things to do, people you have dated—a poem or a potential poem?

On one level, all poems are lists (or, perhaps most interestingly, incomplete lists). There are some simple kinds of listing that we can say are characteristic of poems, such as repetition: "Nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing," to borrow a line from Shakespeare. Or a line that reads "A fish, a bird, a dog, a cat, a snake." Lists get more complicated when you introduce lines, of course, since a new range of formal choice is introduced. For example, you could have a five line poem that listed five things, each on its own line: "A fish, who lives upon the ocean floor;/ a bird, who find a home in distant sky;/ a dog who likes to sit beside the hearth;/ a cat, who likes to curl up on your lap;/ a snake who swims for hours in the lake." This is a fairly simple intersection of list and line since each line "lists" an animal and a quality about where that animal lives, with the result that each animal is given equal attention. To complicate things, though, we can begin to change the length of description

across lines, and to break the lists up; and it's this manipulation of sense that separates a poem from most grocery lists (although a grocery list could still be or become a poem): What happens if the first five lines read as above, but were followed by five more lines, about a human and where he lives and the nature of that human existence? Such a form would implicitly put more emphasis on the "human" than the animals preceding it.

Whitman is fond of many different list forms, and as you might imagine, his lists are manifold, from the simple adjectival list "tenacious, acquisitive, tireless" to his declarative lists of actions: "I see, dance, sing"; to, more elaborately, the kind of listing that primarily drives the poem, a series of statements that ultimately reflect the poet's attitude toward what he sees. In this brief passage, for example, we see a handful of the different ways that lists—in this case, the listing of the earth's qualities, can function over and across lines:

Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of departed sunset! Earth of the mountains misty-topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!
Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!
Far swooping elbowed earth! Rich apple-blossomed earth!
Smile, for your lover comes!

In the first line, we find a simple address to the earth, describing it and characterizing it adjectivally. On the second line, we find another address with the same structure: "Earth"—the vocative noun—followed by a prepositional adjectival phrase "of departed sunset"—a repetition of that straightforward syntax of the first line. But this time the invocation takes up only *half* the line, establishing rhythmic variation; there's a caesura in the middle of the line. The second half of the line inverts the noun and adjective of the adjectival phrase: rather than the "misty-topt mountain" formulation we would expect from the pattern established by the first two examples, we get "mountains misty-topt."

The next line reverts to the single line of description, but builds and expands upon it with a more complicated prepositional phrase that contains qualifications; the over-all effect is akin to a musical crescendo: “Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue.” It’s hard to read this line out loud without sounding breathless, and thus the poem’s invocations sprawl out expansively, hungrily. The next line furthers this sense of expansiveness—paradoxically—by compressing language and syntax until it almost seems ungrammatical: “Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river”—as if the poet wants to contain so much that he has excised all but the most necessary words, words that leave us with the speaker’s sense of urgency. Two lines later Whitman violates the list-making pattern in yet another way, introducing a line that doesn’t begin with the hard single stress “Earth” but with the adjectival phrase: “Far swooping elbowed earth,” and again this line is divided into two, stippling and varying the list further. And, finally, the last line of this paragraph is a vocative address, like those that have preceded it, but it also is an imperative—“Smile, for your lover comes!”—which establishes a new syntax that nonetheless echoes and riffs on the syntactical pattern that preceded it, since “Smile,” which functions here as a verb, at first reads as a noun, paralleling the earlier addresses to “Earth.”

Of course, not all poems look like lists, or make us think of lists. But the list is a kind of DNA for the poem, and manipulating the “list”-iness of a poem is one way to complicate and intensify its structural and musical effects. Because “Song of Myself” is so sprawling, it needs some kind of anchoring system in order to “get it all in,” so to speak; this anchor, for Whitman, is that use of anaphora, which allows him to move from anecdote to anecdote and idea to idea. The anaphora is simultaneously an expression of Whitman’s need to get it all in the poem—the august and the simple, the contralto and the farmer, the soldier and the sailor. Without the list-scaffolding, such inclusiveness could easily seem disconnected or

unfocussed. So, paradoxically, you realize that this highly structured syntactical pattern allows Whitman much more room to move than if he used no patterning at all.