OBEY LITTLE, RESIST MUCH: WHITMAN'S FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY

ROBERT J. BEGIEBING

Song of Ourselves: Walt Whitman and the Fight for Democracy
By Mark Edmundson
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IN 2019 I SENT *THE MAILER REVIEW* EDITOR A WORK ENTITLED "Mailer and Whitman: An Interview on American Democracy." While I awaited my interview to appear in this current issue of the *Review*, Phillip Sipiora asked me to review Mark Edmundson's new book *Song of Ourselves: Walt Whitman and the Fight for Democracy*, just published (no less) by Harvard University Press. Wouldn't you know it! I assumed that Edmundson had beaten me to the punch, stolen my thunder, worked from the same source materials, and used Whitman's same words as I did to help us learn from Whitman's wisdom regarding our newly threatened democracy. We Americans over the past four years, after all, had been living through a time when our democratic institutions had been challenged more than at any time since the Civil War. So it probably makes sense that a rare academic or two who still believe in the power of literature in the mind, the soul, and the world would turn to Whitman (our national poet of democracy) to speak to us again. Certainly, Edmundson and I were riding the same Whitmanesque horse, but we were galloping through the pastures of two different genres. Fortunately, we also had focused our attention, mostly if not entirely, on different sources from the Whitman *oeuvre*.

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What is striking to me is that Edmundson demonstrates in *Song of Ourselves* his enduring, unfashionable faith in the continuing relevance and power of great works of literature. Faith even in the works of "canonical authors." I first encountered such sailing against the prevailing academic winds in 2004 when I read Edmundson's *Why Read?* I read that book again before approaching my review assignment. I am going to suggest that *Why Read?* makes a fine preface to, perhaps an apologia for, his *Song of Ourselves.* It is worth taking a few moments to look at that prefatory work before looking at his new book. His epigraph to *Why Read?* says it all in a nutshell. It is from Emerson's "The American Scholar": *"Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire."*

You can almost hear the howls of agony in the groves of academe. Whitman? Emerson, his mentor? How can these two be any use to us now, unless we can find an amusing, clever way to debunk them? "A valuable literary critic," Edmundson writes halfway through his earlier book, "is not someone who debunks canonical figures, or who puts writers into historical contexts, or, in general, one who propounds new and brilliant theories of interpretation. A valuable critic, rather, is one who brings forth the philosophy of life latent in major works of art and imagination. He makes the author's implicit wisdom explicit, and he offers that wisdom to the judgment of the world. When he encounters works that are not wise but foolish, what he does, in general, is leave them alone."

Edmundson, a working-class jock whose high-school cronies were a group of school haters and teacher tormentors, did not go into the study of literature to demonstrate superiority through theoretical prowess (although he is well informed in theory himself). He has devoted himself to the study of literature because he loved literature, because he was turned on to its power to open doors to our inner life and our life in the world by a great teacher, as he recounts in his memoir *Teacher: The One Who Made the Difference* (2002). All of us who went into the teaching and study of literature for the love of it have stories of teachers who made the difference. Can one be forgiven today for considering it a mystery why anyone would undertake a life-long journey in literature (a precarious adventure at best) for any other reason? But we have come over the past forty-odd years to the point where hordes of literature professors went into it, apparently, for other reasons. Edmundson again from *Why Read?*

> But down the hall in the humanities building now . . . one finds work that is best described as out-and-out rewriting of the authors at hand . . . . not so much criticism as transformation. One approaches the work at hand, and recasts it in the terms of Foucault, or Marx, or feminism, or Derrida, or Queer Theory, or what have you. . . . One effectively reads not a text by Dickens, but one by another author. Dickens's truth is replaced by the truth according to Michael Foucault—or Fredric Jameson, or Helene Cixous—and there the process generally ends. . . . The best literature tends to be a layered experience . . . . Theory, on the other hand, tends to be an all-or-nothing affair. . . . If you set theory between readers and literature—if you make theory a prerequisite to discussing a piece of writing—you effectively deny the student a chance to encounter the first level of literary density, the level he's ready to negotiate. Theory is used, then, to banish aspiring readers from literary experience that by rights belongs to them.

It is students, coming to works of literature for the first time, who suffer from the turn teaching in the humanities has taken, and maybe we should be concerned about that even more than we might be by the author (often dead) who suffers, as well. Let me assure you, however, that Edmundson's book-length argument is far richer and more nuanced than I can express in a few paragraphs. But my hope is that we can begin to see from what I have offered why he might turn to Whitman in the early 2020s to remind us of one noble soul who confronted on his own terms the risky, necessary, and never-ending battle to save democracy. Even flawed democracies like our own (as flawed as ourselves) are threatened on all sides by forces that would defeat them.

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In *Song of Ourselves*, Edmundson has written a guidebook to a great poem about democracy. He uses the 1855 edition of the poem, embedded without title in the original *Leaves of Grass,* the book Whitman sent to Emerson, before Whitman revised *Leaves* throughout his life. As our tour guide says, his book is not for specialists and scholars, but for "general readers who go to lit-

erature for pleasure and instruction," who when reading Whitman may come to feel "grateful to be alive." He walks us through Whitman's vision quest, following the poet's footsteps as Whitman seeks a philosophy of life, of how one becomes many in a democratic whole.

Whitman hopes "to inaugurate a new age" of "authentic democracy" through a new literature. Such a democracy, as Edmundson says, is "not only a form of practical governance but a form of spiritual life." Whitman's ambition is not unlike Mailer's ambition to initiate a revolution in the consciousness of his time, through literature. To achieve his goal, Edmundson writes, Whitman "published the most profound and original poem America has ever seen." Free verse for a free nation. This is of course a big claim, but when you finish Edmundson's book you might well think that it's a credible claim.

Song of Myself, Edmundson's primary object of analysis, reveals the growth of the poet's mind and heart, but unlike Wordsworth's many lines spent on childhood and youth in *The Prelude*, Whitman writes of the growth of an adult's mind as it moves toward understanding, acceptance, and hope for an egalitarian future. Other poems published in *Leaves of Grass* will focus on the poetic inspirations of childhood—"Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," for example.

Following Edmundson's tour—and the book primarily is a step-by-step close reading of the 1336-line poem—we see that Whitman's purpose is not only to replace priest with poet, but to replace the old "intensity of meaning," previously reserved for the world's organized religions, with democracy's new spiritual intensity. The pathway ahead is not through disrespect for the old religions, but through our abandoning of the old hierarchies, old dispensations, old propped up feudal structures and aristocracies, in favor of egalitarian nonconformity (mutual respect for others within our individual freedoms). This was Emerson's earlier path, and later in the 20th century nonconformity would become Mailer's too (as we see most clearly in Mailer's *Lipton's Journal* and *Advertisements for Myself*). It is not an easy path; it is a challenging but joyous one.

Whitman begins his journey with a dialogue between body and soul, a dialectic seeking the synthesis of both, the living significance of both. A true expansion of consciousness must include the body. That is Whitman's invitation to the soul, to join the common physical life on equal terms, neither one (body nor soul) abased to the other. In Mailer's terms in *Lipton's*, the

invitation is to open consciousness to the unconscious; that is to integrate the two, to that wholeness Carl Jung called "individuation." Though Whitman's soul is de-divinified, as Edmundson says, it is nevertheless still sacred. But unlike Mailer, Whitman will thereby disassociate soul from God and Satan. Democracy, in Whitman's view, is precisely where soul is to be free, to be "most creative and humane," as Edmundson puts it. Edmundson notes as well that Whitman's private journals presage the discoveries revealed in the published work, and the same is true for Emerson and Mailer. About a hundred lines into *Song of Myself*, Whitman reveals his central metaphor for democracy: leaves of grass, the unifying image of the one (a leaf) still part of the many (leaves), a larger whole in the ecology of interrelations. Self, soul, individual, and the democratic community become one interrelated organism. Herein lies the power to move us toward a positive destiny. Binding us together above all by empathy toward our fellow citizens.

Beyond that central metaphor (and Edmundson reminds us that for Aristotle "metaphor making is an indelible sign of genius"), Whitman renews the old epic catalogue (from Homer's to Milton's) as a way of pulling us all into his democratic vision. Some of these catalogues Edmundson quotes from the next couple hundred lines to show Whitman's efforts to demonstrate through his "panoptic vision of America" that "the singularity of each being matters, and their collective identity does too." And from that many out of one, of single individuals, Whitman turns to the states to make the same case for singularity, collective identity, and union. Nearly half-way through the poem, Whitman turns to celebrate our achievements before returning to, as Edmundson puts it quoting Blake, "the mental fight." And it is at this point that our tour guide launches us next into Whitman's hymn to physical vitality, to the beauty and pleasures of the body, even to the worship of the body, as opposed to the repressions and denials of the body and its physical life in his time. Another catalogue finally arises out of this hymn. A catalogue of distrust of the teachers, preachers, and literary men who promulgate religious doctrine and the old feudalisms of aristocracy-worship. Such men, mostly, are contrasted to heroes who have fought for democracy, starting with those who fought in the American revolution.

But in nature Whitman finds the greatest contrast to the hawkers of doctrine, an idea that begets yet another catalogue. In animals we see exempla of the ways of being that would defeat those who have pounded our social and religious prejudices and repressions into us. As Mailer has said more

than once, one of the most dangerous human impulses threatening our own defeat is fundamentalism—and its train of disciplines and guilts. Fundamentalism, as Whitman saw it, restricts the freedom of self and soul, but freedom is how we discover how to live (and govern and love) by contributing to the ongoing venture of a free and equal society. You may recall these memorable lines from *Song*, which Edmonson quotes at even greater length:

> I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals . . . .
> They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
> They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
> They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
> Not one . . . . is demented with the mania of owning things,
> Not one kneels to another nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago.
> Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth.

Rightly, I think, Edmundson then turns our attention to the figure of Jesus, whom we see reflected in the lines above, as a central figure in Whitman's definition of democracy. Take Jesus out of centuries of doctrine and orthodoxy and you have a representative man. Nearly 1,000 lines into the poem Jesus arrives more fully. Whitman takes on the persona of Jesus, as Mailer did in *The Gospel According to the Son*, humanizing Jesus, placing him with us. Whitman takes Jesus out of the past, making him a vehicle into the future, into a world of possibility, of human rebirth. It is a secular faith, Edmundson reminds us. "Jesus matters because he is the first real democrat" (emphasis on the small "d"). "He preaches the equality of all men and women . . . . [he] overcame the ethos of Rome, and the seeds for democracy went into the ground." Whitman removes traditional divinity from Jesus, places him with us, suffering and teaching by his actions as much as by his words, unlike "the old cautious hucksters," as Whitman puts it, of the old religious orthodoxies and admonitions and restrictions. Even without reading further one thinks of Jesus's principles: loving and empathizing with others, honoring the poor and the laborer and the least among us, following not the rule-mongering Pharisees, nor the life-defeating money changers; putting them, rather, in their place. But you know the enemies of democracy as well as Whitman does. He reminds us of what we know.

Song of Myself, we begin to see under Edmundson's tutelage, is also a spiritual autobiography, what Edmundson calls "his shamanistic voyage." Rather than atheism, rather than denial of soul and spirit, Whitman is merely telling us not to obsess and twist ourselves into mental contortions over defining and worrying about God or about properly glorifying him. "I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand God not in the least," Edmundson quotes the poet. "A mouse," Whitman says, "is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels." This animistic spirituality moves us outwards toward respect, even empathy, for nature itself. And is Blakean in its embrace of divinity in all things and in its Gnosticism to turn to the Jesus *within* us, to the empathic (democratic) soul within. These are the messages of the final lines of the poem. This is the invitation Whitman extends to us. Whitman, Edmundson emphasizes, is not issuing edicts, but *invitations*, in the manner of "every other imaginative writer of consequence." Whitman knows his poem is a gamble, that odds are against us, but that should not keep him or us from the fight for democracy.

Part II of Edmundson's book, "In the Hospitals," turns us beyond Whitman's words to his acts. This section is the briefest of the three parts, the full poem itself being the final third. The emphasis above all "In the Hospital" is on Whitman's practical, loving empathy for others. For the suffering soldiers, doctors, and nurses of the Civil War hospitals in Washington, DC. "It wasn't enough to write poems about the war; it wasn't enough to write journalistic pieces, though Whitman wrote some effective dispatches from the camps," Edmonson says. "He wanted to do more, and now he saw what, given his talents and his heart's inclination, he might contribute." His vigils, comforting, and labors on behalf of the wounded and dying soldiers on both sides of the conflict and of both black and white victims are poignantly detailed in Edmundson's account. It wasn't just the wounds of war. It was the disease, the lack of hygienic practices, the stench and suffering of "these huge swarms of dear, wounded, sick dying boys" for whom Whitman said he had to try to lessen the suffering and lonely deaths all around him (and at the risk of his own deteriorating health). His letters home at the behest of these isolated, ill men that Edmundson quotes at some length are documents of deep sympathy and love. The men seemed to be the new American breed of heroes he had sought in his poems, stoic, proud, self-reliant. By his acts Whitman was, as Edmundson says, "discovering new powers in himself. It seems he could do in life what he imagined in his poetry: he could enter the spir-

its of the wounded men who surround him." Compassion, kindness, humility, empathy—the essence of true democracy. "They have grown to seem to me," Whitman wrote to one heroic hospital worker, a Miss Gregg, "as my sons or dear young brothers."

In the closing chapter of Part II, Edmundson argues that in the hospitals "Whitman effectively completed *Song of Myself*. He became a version of the individual that his poem prophesied." He was learning to put into practice "what he had learned from the spiritual voyage he had undergone" in composing the poem. His poem and his time in the hospitals "set a standard for democratic thought and action, a high standard. Surely few of us could ever fulfill it. But I think he points us in the right direction . . . . He's up ahead waiting for us."

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Like Whitman's poem itself, Edmundson's book draws us toward the wisdom embodied in a great text. What I would unabashedly call the wisdom texts, in and out of "the canon," still offer us sources of healing, humility, empathy, and freedom. But we will have to set aside our political tribalism and our intellectual egoism if we are to have a snowball's chance in hell of learning from the wisdom offered in works of literature. And we would have to learn to disavow the same forces Whitman did that threaten or impede our journey toward democracy—entrenched financial and political power, oppressive religious fundamentalism and antiquated orthodoxy, and arrogant aristocracies (whether ancient or modern). Although Edmundson never mentions the Donald Trump phenomenon, he makes sure that we understand Whitman's disavowal of leader-worship, of our deep-seated, anti-democratic impulses to follow the great conman, who for his own narcissistic ends manipulates the many he holds himself above. Edmundson summarizes Whitman's beliefs on this point: "When you abase yourself to another's power and offer no resistance, you are doing ill."

To return to our beginning. Will we read texts that offer us their wisdom for our consideration? Will we teach them? Can we learn to love and enjoy literature again? I don't mean these as purely rhetorical questions. I ask what I take to be essential questions that I am not capable of answering alone. And my own skepticism regarding our capacity to enjoy and learn from literature anymore is deep. Among the many authors Whitman has inspired

over the last 160 years, Edmundson leaves Edward Abbey off his list, but I would add Abbey to that list in closing. Perhaps we can take heart from some of Whitman's inspiring lines that Abbey often quoted to boost his sense of hope against his own baleful skepticism about where America is heading: "Joy, Shipmate, Joy!" and "Obey little, resist much."