Monkey Trouble

Christopher Peterson

Published by Fordham University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/55730
In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman writes that the “equable” poet “judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling round a helpless thing.” Illuminating everything without exception, solar judgment appears to beget a capacious and magnanimous ethico-political relation, an illimitable and indiscriminate hospitality that embraces the vulnerable and powerless. According to Jane Bennett, “to go solar, to accept all with equanimity, is to elide the particular hierarchy of values and the particular regime of perception dominant in the culture.”

Citing Bergson’s observation that perception is inherently “subtractive,” a procedure for screening out external stimuli to which the subject is indifferent, Bennett suggests that Whitman provides us with an otherwise nonsubtractive, wholly receptive bearing of and toward the world. On this account, solarity is remarkably similar to the plane of immanence championed by object-oriented ontology. Just as OOO promotes a flat ontology that eschews the hierarchical, fractional distribution of subjective intentionality, the sun orients itself toward all things in equal measure.

Solarity finds some precedent in both ecopoetical and queer approaches to Whitman. Jimmie Killingsworth, for instance, argues that Whitman...
ascertains “the things of nature” in an indirect, nonacquisitive manner, one that affirms the limits of human language to represent otherness. Similarly attuned to the problem of alterity, Peter Coviello maintains that the “embarrassingly immodest . . . confidence with which the poet casts himself in often improbable roles” runs counterpoint to a sustained concern with sympathetic identification. Michael Warner also acknowledges that Whitman “thematizes a modern phenomenology of self everywhere: ‘I celebrate myself, and sing myself.’” Yet Warner justifiably takes issue with readers who reduce Whitman’s poetic “I” to such declarations of liberal selfhood, arguing that Whitman ultimately engenders “the pragmatics of selfing a mess.” In this regard, the absorption of otherness into the self is never fully accomplished. In “To a Stranger,” for instance, the speaker addresses someone both anonymous yet known: “You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me.” It remains uncertain whether the poem describes a moment of uncanny misrecognition in which the speaker encounters an other who reminds him of someone previously known or whether the ostensible stranger literally belongs to the poet’s past. Whether familiar or strange, this alterity yields to a quintessential Whitmanian merger: “I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours/only nor left my body mine only.” On closer inspection, however, this merging does not describe a dialectical synthesis that incorporates alterity: the other’s body neither fully belongs to this other nor to the “I” who describes its incomplete arrogation.

As both Warner and Coviello demonstrate, the disarray of self-constitution can be registered only if we dwell with the poetic imbrication of self and other. This nondialectical chiasmus weakens the propensity of the poetic voice to overflow its own boundaries and absorb everything into itself. D. H. Lawrence famously lampooned this absorptive power for its apparent monomaniacal pomposity:

All that false exuberance. All those lists of things boiled in one pudding-cloth! No, no!
I don’t want all those things inside me, thank you.
“I reject nothing,” says Walt.
If that is so, one must be a pipe open at both ends, so everything runs through.

. . .

“I embrace ALL,” says Whitman. “I weave all things into myself.”
Do you really! There can’t be much left of you when you’ve done.
When you’ve cooked the awful pudding of One Identity.

. . .
As soon as Walt knew a thing, he assumed a One Identity with it. . . .

This merging, en masse, One Identity, Myself monomania was a carry-over from the old Love idea.10

Lawrence employs reductio ad absurdum to show that there is both too much and too little of Whitman in his poetry. The latter’s seeming self-abandonment merely conceals its arrogance. Of course, the exuberance that Lawrence himself exhibits here risks imitating the self-glorification that he wishes to mock. Similar to Lawrence, Doris Sommer argues that equality is “synonymous with identity” for Whitman, who assumes a self “at the center of a universe that repeats him endlessly.”11 Undoubtedly a certain grandness of purpose is not altogether foreign to Whitman. In Song of Myself, he declares: “I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter’s/s/compass.”12 Several verses later he inscribes his name and identity directly into the poem: “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.”13 A world unto himself, Whitman nevertheless assures us that he is “no stander above men and women or apart from them.” Yet several lines before he characterizes the poet in the 1855 preface as one who suspends judgment, the speaker stations himself “high up out of reach,” where “he stands turning a concentrated light . . . he turns the pivot with his finger . . . he baffles the swiftest runners as he stands and easily overtakes and envelopes them.”14 The poet as sun shines down upon all. Not even the fastest runners can escape its advancing reach. Nonjudgmental judgment might appear to equate to a form of incalculable hospitality, an openness “To You. Whoever you are.”15 Yet what if a judge’s calculable discernment is precisely what is needed to reckon with an utterly incalculable, perhaps even oppressive, solarity? Can we finally distinguish between a capacious and a rapacious solarity? Does a nonjudgmental judgment finally amount to a total absence of judgment without which everything would be helplessly exposed, willy-nilly, to the sun’s scorching rays? Consider that the “swiftest runners” might be read as fleeing the sun precisely because it has “baffled” them: that is, confused and obstructed their path. Are they also helpless things, vulnerable and powerless objects of a light that relentlessly pursues them? If at first glint solar judgment appears to register only magnanimous receptivity, might it not also cast a long shadow of violence that obscures as much as it illuminates?

Focused on the luminosity of objects, Bennett positions herself squarely within the Platonic tradition that equates the sun with the good beyond being, the condition of possibility for sight, the “child of the good,” which
is to say knowledge and truth.\textsuperscript{16} Solarity thus contrasts with OOO’s theory of object withdrawal discussed in chapter 3. OOO seeks to evade the light in a manner that recalls the Levinasian claim that Western metaphysics enacts a phenomenological violence that utterly absorbs alterity: “Light is that through which something is other than myself, but already as if it came from me. The illuminated object is something one encounters, but from the very fact that it is illuminated one encounters it as if it came from us. It does not have a fundamental strangeness. Its transcendence is wrapped in immanence.”\textsuperscript{17} Intentionality manifests a structure of immanence in the sense that the exterior world is reduced to the solipsistic ego. The illumination of objects for the subject depends on a visual economy that collapses the “interval of space” that would sustain the other’s transcendence.\textsuperscript{18} Levinas goes so far as to claim that “solipsism is neither an aberration nor a sophism; it is the very structure of reason.”\textsuperscript{19} He counters this solipsism by posing the possibility of a transcendence or exteriority that would escape the reduction of otherness to the same.

To put it all too telegraphically, light is \textit{good} for Bennett, \textit{bad} for Levinas and OOO. Yet must we subscribe to such a Manichean dualism between good and bad, light and dark? Consider the reading of Levinas that Derrida advances in “Violence and Metaphysics.” Although he agrees with Levinas that the heliological metaphor constitutes one of the guiding lights of Western philosophy, he nevertheless interrogates his presumption that phenomenology can be utterly evaded. Derrida asks: “What language will ever escape it [the solar metaphor]? How, for example, will the metaphysics of the face as the \textit{epiphany} of the other free itself of light? Light perhaps has no opposite; if it does, it is certainly not night. If all languages combat within it, \textit{modifying only} the same metaphor and choosing the best light, Borges . . . is correct again: ‘Perhaps universal history is but the history of the diverse \textit{intonations} of several metaphors.’”\textsuperscript{20}

OOO’s stress on the withdrawal of objects into the shadowy recesses of their mutual interaction may appear to be the inverse of Bennett’s solarity. Indeed, Bennett does not characterize solarity as anti-Kantian or anticorrelational, seeing “no need to choose between objects or their relations.”\textsuperscript{21} OOO’s ceaseless assembling of objects at random aims to privilege objects above their relations, as if their apparent dissimilarity alone were sufficient to certify the absolute alterity of objects as they relate to each other and to us. Yet whether shadowy or luminous, objects remain phenomena for both Bennett and OOO. The latter wants to make \textit{appear} the disappearance of things, to phenomenalize objects as avoiding phenomenalization. Yet this escape is untenable precisely in light of the object’s withdrawal. It presup-
poses, in other words, the phenomenality it aims to escape precisely by illuminating the object’s opacity. How might we choose the best light as Derrida suggests? Might it be something like a lunar light, an indirect luminescence that belongs neither to the violence of day nor the violence of night? Might a certain lunar judgment remain refractory to the either/or of appearance and disappearance, presence and absence?

Solarity seems to offer a welcome antidote to the nonrelational extravagances of OOO. Yet even though Bennett wants to avoid constructing a false opposition between relations and things, she nevertheless gives scant attention to the human/object relation. Indeed, her reading of Whitman ironically betrays its own subtractive agency by bracketing the poetic “I” who licenses its ample hospitality. In order to abide the imbrication between this “I” and its others, both human and nonhuman, we must eschew the overcorrective elision of antehumanism on which Bennett’s leap toward alterity depends. A more capacious reading of Whitman requires that we reckon with rather than bracket such unabashed statements as “I know perfectly well my own egotism.” We must assess such hubristic enunciations alongside their less boastful counterparts in order to expose a poetic voice that is equal parts intramundane and “transcendental.” In “Song of Myself,” for instance, the speaker asserts: “Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am. . . . Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.” To be both in and out of the game is to inhabit a space of immanent transcendency in relation to the poet’s litanies of countless human and nonhuman others. This immanent transcendency is synonymous neither with the sublative merging for which Lawrence chastises Whitman nor the unconditional hospitality that Bennett promotes.

**Solarity’s Eclipse**

The distinctive cataloguing practice that pervades Whitman, his “doggedly horizontal lists,” bear striking similarities to the litanies that pervade the writings of OOO theorists. Ian Bogost stretches such litanizing to farcical extremes by posting an index on his blog of every reference to Mexican food from his book *Alien Phenomenology*, as well as by applying his programming skills to creating a “Latour Litanizer,” a gadget that allows visitors to his website to generate at the click of a button a random list of objects derived from Wikipedia. Whitman’s catalogs are certainly diverse, but they are distinct from the litanizer insofar as they do not constitute an unplanned or artless “bare lists of words” (in the Emersonian phrase that allegedly inspired Whitman). On the contrary, their apparent incongruity
disguises an overarching organizational unity. As Bennett observes, Whitman’s catalogs also *list* in the sense that they incline or lean toward various objects in a manner that is far from indifferent and unmotivated. Consider the following example from “The Sleepers”:

The homeward bound and the outward bound,
The beautiful lost swimmer, the ennuyé, the onanist, the female
that loves unrequited, the money-maker,
The actor and actress, those through with their parts and those
waiting to commence,
The affectionate boy, the husband and wife, the voter, the nominee
that is chosen and the nominee that has fail’d,
The great already known, and the great anytime after to-day,
The stammerer, the sick, the perfect-form’d, the homely,
The criminal that stood in the box, the judge that sat and sen-
tenced him, the fluent lawyers, the jury, the audience,
The laugher and weeper, the dancer, the midnight widow, the red
squaw,
The consumptive, the erysipalite, the idiot, he that is wrong’d,
The antipodes, and every one between this and them in the dark,
I swear they are averaged now—one is no better than the other,
The night and sleep have liken’d them and restored them.

Employing a periodic sentence whose main clause (“I swear they are averaged now”) appears after a string of subordinate ones, Whitman inscribes difference in sameness according to a pattern that Betsy Erkkila identifies with America’s unofficial motto: *e pluribus unum* (“out of many one”). Sleep figures as a democratizing force, but its leveling effect does not precipitate the withdrawal of objects into absolute darkness. In an essay called “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” Whitman writes that “the actual living light is always curiously from elsewhere—follows unaccountable sources, and is lunar and relative at the best.” The phe-
nomenalization of objects is indirect—withdrawn as Harman would say—but not absolutely so. Luminosity is also *relational*. While “The Sleepers” employs night as an equalizing figure, “new beings appear” nevertheless as the nomadic speaker “pierce[s] the darkness,” drifting among a constellation of different sleepers. Their appearance is refracted through the speaker’s lunar judgment that selects some objects rather than others, a judgment that does not say “yes” to everything, but necessarily discriminates.
This partiality of Whitman’s catalogs, their listing or leaning toward, also manifests in the following verse from “Song of Myself,” ironically perhaps given its portrayal of spontaneous human and nonhuman agency:

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, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor,
The snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls,
The hurrahs for popular favorites, the fury of rous’d mobs,
The flap of the curtain’d litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital,
The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall,
The excited crowd, the policeman with his star quickly working his passage to the centre of the crowd,
The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes,
What groans of over-fed or half-starv’d who fall sunstruck or in fits,
What exclamations of women taken suddenly who hurry home and give birth to babes,
What living and buried speech is always vibrating here, what howls restrain’d by decorum,
Arrests of criminals, slights, adulterous offers made, acceptances, rejections with convex lips,
I mind them or the show or resonance of them—I come and I depart.32

Referring archaically in this context to a stretcher, the “curtain’d litter” literally conveys a sick man as well as figuratively bears the litanies that litter Whitman’s verse, language that rends the curtain dividing human from nonhuman.33 This bustling city scene of commingling human and object sounds achieves coherence not only through the “I” who surveys the scene, but also through the acoustic rhythms of the nonhuman blabs, clinks, clanks, pelts, and flaps that punctuate the verse. These sounds are collated with human hurrahs, shouts, groans, and howls: all striking examples of spontaneous, impulsive, perhaps even “bestial” speech, far removed from the humanist vision of a reasoning, intentional subject. That the “I” who “mind[s]” these things does not so much directly cognize them as feel their “resonance” stresses an aural and pulsative receptivity distinct from the appropriative mastery of visual surveillance.
Bennett plausibly reads Whitman’s reference to “living and buried speech” as rendering things “vocal material actants.” Whitman does seem to call on us to hear things “speak” in “Song of Myself,” but elsewhere objects are far less voluble. In the preface he pronounces the “beauty and dignity” of “dumb real objects,” and in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” objects are likewise portrayed as “dumb, beautiful ministers. . . . 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.” That humans do not plumb the depths of objects implies a nonappropriative relation to them, yet their silent ministration to humans nevertheless appears more passive than active. In the passage Bennett discusses, moreover, the voices of objects are amplified largely on account of her deliberate silencing of human actors, who are replaced with several long strings of ellipses:

The *blab* of the pave, tires of carts, stuff of boot-soles, . . .
. . . the *clank* of the shod horses on the granite floor,
The snow-sleighs, clinking, . . .
. . . the *fury* of rous’d mobs,
The *flap* of the curtain’d litter, . . .

........................................................................................................
The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes,
........................................................................................................

*What living and buried speech is always vibrating here . . .*  

Except for the presumably human mob’s “fury,” Bennett quite literally encourages us to see “men and/women as dreams or dots,” which is precisely how the poet in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore” says the equable poet should *not* see them. The reduction of humans to a typographic mark of omission conditions the humanization of things. To be fair, Bennett quotes this passage again later in the essay with most of the human actors restored. Yet she still omits the “howls restrain’d by decorum,” which most nearly refers to “exclamations of women taken suddenly who hurry home and give birth to babes / *What living and buried speech is always vibrating here.*” While Whitman frequently draws upon the trope of maternity in a manner that risks reducing the role of women to a procreative function, here the speaker disinters the pain of childbirth hidden by romanticized norms of motherhood. This is not to deny the broader implications that Bennett draws from the catalogue’s depiction of thingly agency, but only to question the necessity of adopting a Manichean approach whereby the illumination of objects seems to depend on the concealment of humans—in this case, women—whose literal silencing Whitman invites us to hear.
If agency is truly “distributive,” then how are we to hear this dispersion if some of its voices are actively muted?39

Yet the problem here is not simply that women are silenced in favor of objects. In chapter 2 I argued that the opposition between speech and silence presumes that “giving voice” is an undeniable ethico-political good. As with the principle of solarity, this insistence on the positive value of voice is deeply Platonic insofar as it equates speech with self-presencing truth. As Andrew Cole has argued:

[New vitalists and speculative realists] all work hard not to project the human into the heart of things, [but] in their attempt to respect the indifference of objects in themselves, they do so anyway by dint of the ancient Logos principle by which things call out to us and speak their being. . . . I do not see that speculative realists, or vitalists, are aware of the complicated philosophical history that underlies their project to “make things speak.” Despite their attempts to question Derrida’s criticism of ontotheology, this aspect of Logocentrism has not been addressed.40

Bruno Latour’s conception of nonhuman “actants,” which in no small way has influenced the contemporary “object turn,” is a notable example of this logocentrism. Latour writes:

Once built, the wall of bricks does not utter a word—even though the group of workmen goes on talking and graffiti may proliferate on its surface. Once they have been filled in, the printed questionnaires remain in the archives forever unconnected with human intentions until they are made alive again by some historian. Objects, by the very nature of their connections with humans, quickly shift from being mediators to being intermediaries, counting for one or nothing, no matter how internally complicated they might be. This is why specific tricks have to be invented to make them talk.41

This desire to hear objects speak is no less guided by the principle of language as gift than is Susan’s effort to restore Friday’s voice in Foe, or Lestel’s conception of accréditation by virtue of which humans who teach apes ASL are said to grant nonhumans language. Latour’s vouloir dire, his wanting-to-say, pursues a similar auto-affective logic insofar as it echoes these demands to hear one’s voice reverberated in the responsive speech of others.

As for the human agents that populate Whitman’s lists, Bennett avowedly seeks to “elide or treat [them] as secondary” so that we might heed the voice of objects.42 This strategic elision allows us “to buy time for the things
outside to make their mark.” Solarity is thus portrayed as a temporary tactic:

The poet must be able, periodically, to skip a beat in the regular pulse of this discriminatory perception. Solar moments are necessarily fragile and fleeting. The self who becomes judgment without becoming the judge suspends for a time the sociomoral categories through which s/he usually differentiates his/her responses to things.

For all the references to time, however, solarity’s suspension of judgment is strikingly atemporal. This exclusion of time is evident from Bennett’s initial discussion of Bergson, whose notion of perception hinges on memory: “With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience. In most cases these memories supplant our actual perceptions, of which we then retain only a few hints, thus using them merely as ‘signs’ that recall to us former images.” Perception is subtractive for Bergson because “past images . . . constantly mingle with our perception of the present and may even take its place.” He goes so far as to suggest that perception, understood as an instantaneous intuition of the external world, “is a small matter compared to what memory adds to it.” While Bennett briefly acknowledges the role that memory plays for Bergson, she quickly dismisses it in favor of Whitman’s allegedly atemporal solarity, which “commends to us a practice of judgment unaccompanied by this image/memory.” To bracket memory, however, is to advance a notion of “pure perception” that “exists in theory rather than fact.” Pure perception functions as a heuristic tool for Bergson that elucidates the durational breadth of even the most rapidly occurring perception. Only the elimination of memory would permit us to “touch the reality of the object in an immediate intuition.” In the final analysis, solarity amounts to a mode of pure perception whose elimination of memory promises direct access to things in themselves. Solar moments are not “fragile and fleeting.” They are not even moments, that is, nonjudgmental instants wholly divorced from the past and the future. Solarity’s exclusion of time recalls Husserl’s dream of pure, auto-affective presence: the augenblick of interior monologue that excludes both time and space. Solarity seems to imagine something like an utterly pure hetero-affection, a punctual moment of total openness to alterity, divisible from the retentional past and the protentional future thanks to which perception is always partial and subtractive. That solarity’s “open-armed . . . impersonal”
judgment depends on a nonsubtractive pure perception means that it is not “a difficult skill to master” simply because it does not qualify as a skill, which is to say a capacity for indiscriminate hospitality that humans can develop and perfect.\(^{54}\) Solarity is eclipsed by time from the start.

**Solar Violence**

While Erkkila stresses the democratic commitments voiced by Whitman’s catalogs, she also cautions that their horizontality “could operate paradoxically as a kind of formal tyranny, muting the fact of inequality, race conflict, and radical difference within a rhetorical economy of many and one.”\(^{55}\) As the famous “Black Lucifer” passage in “Sleepers” demonstrates, the textual insistence on sympathetic unity cannot silence the violent historical reality of slavery:

> I am a hell-name and a curse:  
> Black Lucifer was not dead;  
> Or if he was I am his sorrowful, terrible heir;  
> I am the God of revolt—deathless, sorrowful, vast; whoever oppresses me  
> I will either destroy him or he shall release me.  
> Damn him, how he does defile me!  
> Hoppler of his own sons; breeder of children and trader of them—  
> Selling his daughters and the breast that fed his young.  
> Informer against my brother and sister and taking pay for their blood.  
> He laughed when I looked from my iron necklace after the  
> steamboat that carried  
> away my woman.\(^{56}\)

The poet assumes the voice of a slave who rebukes the master for trading children whom he reproduces with his female slaves. Whitman removed both the reference to Lucifer’s blackness and the allusion to miscegenation in the original 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In the 1881 edition he deleted the Lucifer section altogether. Scholars such as Ed Folsom and Isaac Gewirtz have detailed Whitman’s ambivalent attitudes toward black Americans. Whitman was antislavery, but he did not advocate equal rights or citizenship once slavery had been abolished. In the 1850s he supported black colonization, asking “is not America for the Whites? And is it not better so?”\(^{57}\) In the wake of the Civil War, he warned of “the dangers of universal suffrage,” and employed familiar racist tropes in describing blacks
as “but little above the beasts,” possessing “as much intellect . . . as so many baboons.”
Perhaps the most damaging contradiction to the many assertions of monistic sympathy that suffuse Leaves of Grass lies in an unpublished manuscript fragment, undated but most likely written late in his life: “I do not wish to say one word and will not say one word against the blacks—but the blacks can never be to me what the whites are [.] Below all political relations, even the deepest, are still deeper, personal, physiological and emotional ones, the whites are my brothers & I love them.”
As a rejoinder to such admissions of white racial solidarity and blatant racial stereotyping, Gewirtz rewrites a line from “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as “I am with [some of] you.” In so doing, he flouts the established interpretive convention that distinguishes the “I” of a poem from its author. Whitman undoubtedly sought to impress his name and image on the reader by identifying himself as the speaker of Leaves of Grass, as well as by publishing the first edition with a portrait of himself in lieu of his name. The engraving of the author in laborer’s clothing thus reinscribed the identity vacated by the absent signature. Is the persona named “Whitman” in the poem identical with his historical namesake, or does the former remain irreducible to the latter?

Even were one to regard Whitman’s racist statements as separable from the poetic “I,” however, we are still left with the paradox of a voice that declares equality by fiat. Do not such sovereign proclamations risk undermining the poetry’s professed democratic ideals in a manner similar to OOO’s “democracy of objects”? As I argued in chapter 3, OOO’s “strong” posthumanism risks becoming the “weakest” posthumanism, which is to say the most conventionally humanist, precisely because it claims too much for itself. The clamorous claims of object independence presume the human’s power to overthrow itself, thus reinstating the sovereign subject it would dethrone. Yet Whitman’s self-conscious performance of sovereign power lends itself to an ironic reading that contrasts sharply with object-oriented ontology. After all, Whitman’s “I” knows its own egotism. Should we take at face value a poet who declares “I will effuse egotism and show it underlying all, and I will be the bard of personality”? Is it precisely this ironic element that Lawrence missed when he chided Whitman’s arrogance? Far from “preaching egotism,” Whitman explained to his friend Horace Traubel that the “I” of his poetry designates:

personal force: it is personal force that I respect—that I look for. It may be conceit, vanity, egotism—but it is also personal force. . . . It is of the first necessity in my life that this personal prowess should be
brought prominently forward—should be thrown unreservedly into our work. If I said “I, Walt Whitman” in my poems and the text meant only what it literally said, then the situation would be sad indeed—would be very serious: but the Walt Whitman who belongs in the Leaves is not a circumscribed Walt Whitman but just as well a Horace Traubel as any one else—personalized moral, spiritual, force of whatever kind, for whatever day; it is force, force, personal force, we are after.61

Despite the sixfold repetition of the word personal, this force is remarkably depersonalized, inhabitable by anyone who assumes the position of the poetic “I,” which means that this position is precisely nowhere in particular, personal only by virtue of the I’s contingent self-enunciation, and thus radically impersonal and anonymous.

The force of this (im)personality expresses what Derrida characterized in his early essay, “Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” as the “contradictorily coherent” identification of a center that “governs the structure” but does not fully belong to it: “Coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire.”62 The metaphysical disavowal of the center’s structurality is identical to the logic of sovereignty that Derrida would theorize many years later in Rogues. The sovereign governs from the center of a structure to which he does not belong, totally inside/outside, totally “alone” and exceptional. In order to maintain this contradictory position, pure sovereignty must remain utterly silent. As soon as this silence is broken, as soon as sovereignty gives reasons to justify its exceptionality, sovereignty becomes shareable. Its “center” is elsewhere. Sovereignty is no longer sovereignty. Yet the dispersal of the “I” in Whitman is distinct from metaphysical sovereignty insofar as Whitman is far from silent about it. He is all too ready to declare its performative contingency: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.).”63 The contradictory coherence of Whitman’s declarations goes to the fundamental antinomy that Derrida identifies at the center of democracy itself: the aporetic knot formed by a freedom that secures the sovereign self at the “center” of a political structure of equality shared by many other selves. Drawing from Aristotle’s canonical theory of politics, Derrida underscores how democracy wavers between an infinite, incalculable freedom on the one hand, and a delimited, calculable equality on the other.64 Absolute, unfettered freedom would be antidemocratic insofar as it would disallow the political conditions that safeguard freedom’s equal distribution. Every citizen is a potential rogue whose
otherwise unbridled sovereignty is restrained by the principle of equality. Rather than abide the unconditional sovereignty of each citizen, democracy requires, at least in principle, that everyone be equally free, thus circumscribing liberty from the start.

Whitman’s democratic desire might seem more in line with the mock Latin *e unibus pluram* (out of one, many) than *e pluribus unum*. Yet sovereignty and democracy do not find themselves suspended between mutually exclusive demands: an incalculable freedom facing off against a calculable equality. Rather, they are suspended within, by, and from themselves. Sovereignty is internal to democracy, and vice versa. Insofar as everyone is equally free, equality is never purely calculable and freedom is never purely incalculable. Derrida draws from medical vocabulary to account for how democracy is afflicted with an “autoimmune” conflict between unconditional freedom and conditional equality, a coupling by virtue of which freedom and equality always bequeath both conditional and unconditional traits in whatever concrete forms they assume. This internal division by virtue of which the many is always one and the one always many accounts for why Whitman expresses his democratic desire as a “personal force,” the *kratos* (-cracy, “force”) of a singular subject whose power is nevertheless dispersed among numerous others.

Whitman’s poetic voice often seeks to expand the boundaries of democracy beyond the “we” that tacitly defines itself as white and male, most notoriously in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. Yet an expanded democracy is not and cannot ever be wholly inclusive. The question of who or what belongs to democracy is infinitely reassessable because there are no natural limits that determine its borders once and for all. Democracy is founded on both explicit and implicit discriminatory judgments regarding who or what are to be included. Derrida remarks, for example, that the extension of voting rights to immigrants is not necessarily more democratic: “One will never actually be able to ‘prove’ that there is more democracy in granting or in refusing the right to vote to immigrants, notably those who live and work in the national territory. . . . One electoral law is thus always at the same time more and less democratic than another.” Later he asks, “how far is democracy to be extended, the *people* of democracy, and the ‘each “one”’ of democracy? To the dead, to animals, to trees and rocks?” Despite appearances, Derrida is not proclaiming the advent of a cosmocracy that would include everything; rather, the interrogative form of this ostensibly inclusive gesture stresses that the problem of democracy’s limit must remain a question. We might believe that we are being “more democratic” when we include trees and rocks, but
this irreducible belief cannot be converted into a definitive calculation that would evidence our perfectible march toward absolute inclusivity. What about bacteria and viruses? Artificial intelligence? The point is not that we should include everything, but that the inclusion of whomever or whatever cannot be construed as “more democratic” except by conceiving democracy as a totality—except, that is, by conceiving democracy undemocratically. The calculation of “more” and “less” corresponds to a container model of democracy. To speak of political measures and decisions as more or less democratic implies an all-inclusive ideal against which this or that other can be added or subtracted.

The impossible advent of full inclusivity leads Derrida to conclude that democracy always remains to come. This deferred democracy does not correspond to a regulative idea: an aspirational yet unachievable state of perpetual peace and inclusivity toward which we nevertheless ought to aim. Nor does this deferral constitute an alibi, a “right to defer.” On the contrary: “[T]he to-come of democracy is also, although without presence, the hic et nunc of urgency, of the injunction as absolute urgency. Even when democracy makes one wait or makes one wait for it.” We are ethically obliged to promote an imperfect democracy even though it never fully presents itself.

Whitman’s incessant poetic listing undeniably lists (desires) democracy. It yearns for a shared, all-inclusive world that awaits only the elimination of sociopolitical hierarchies. Although his litanies are not composed of random, unrelated objects, they nevertheless share with OOO a teleological desire to level all hierarchies and antagonisms. In contrast with Derrida’s democracy to come, Whitman’s democracy “arrives” by force of his sovereign enunciations. In “Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood,” for instance, America is figured as the “ship of democracy” whose freight bears “Earth’s résumé entire.” America is the “living present brain, heir of the dead, the Old/world brain,” a world of “superber birth” nurtured in the womb by Europe and Asia, those “antecedent nations” that beget America as its finest offspring. The speaker concedes that the ship is “not to fair-sail unintermitted always, /The storm shall dash thy face, the murk of war and worse than/war shall cover thee all over.” In addition to foreseeing the rough seas ahead, the speaker also acknowledges that one can only limn the future of American democracy:

Thou wonder world yet undefined, uniform’d, neither do I define thee,

How can I pierce the impenetrable blank of the future?
I feel thy ominous greatness evil as well as good. . . .

But I do not undertake to define thee, hardly to comprehend thee,
I but thee name, thee prophesy, as now,
I merely thee ejaculate!  

Whitman fittingly couples the insemination of American democracy with metaphors of containment. From the nation’s “teeming womb” emerge “giant babes [the states] in ceaseless procession.” America is “the globe of globes,” an “orb” that “the FUTURE only holds.” This spherical conception of democracy figures America as the living “heir of the dead, the Old/World brain,” which incubates the new world until its birth. Crucially, this matrix is inverted once America is born: nourished in the womb of the old world, the new world henceforth becomes “the globe of globes” that fully incorporates the past into its present, ideal form.

Although the poem affirms the vulnerability of democratic progress, this problem is quickly cast overboard. Come what misfortunes may, America will “surmount them all.” Citing America’s artistic, educational, spiritual, and moral superiority, the speaker declares, “These! these in thee, (certain to come,) to-day I prophesy.” In contrast with the disseminated, unguaranteed future of the democracy to come, the content of Whitman’s future America is predetermined: the poet prematurely “ejaculates” a democracy “certain to come.”

The “ship of democracy” thus names a vessel whose unwavering desire is vulnerable only to external forces, figured as a “livid cancer” that threatens with its “hideous claws, clinging upon thy breasts, seeking to strike thee deep within.” We might be tempted to read this malignancy in terms of Whitman’s exceptionalist ideology, which encloses democracy within a “global” America that excludes the rest of the world. America is said to eclipse all other nations because it is the unique “fruit of all the Old ripening.” Alternatively, we might attribute this cancer to Whitman’s racism or the sociopolitical inequalities of nineteenth-century America more generally. Yet to focus only on these threats from without is to disavow the autoimmune struggle between freedom and equality internal to democracy as such. Infinitely perfectible and infinitely corruptible, democracy is deferred not simply due to accidental, “contaminating” forces such as American exceptionalism or racism. Even were Whitman to have cast a wider net and have recognized the contributions of other nations to his democratic ideal, even were he not to have expressed racist views, his conception of democracy would remain no less teleological, no less com-
mitted to a democratic desire that knows itself, a desire seemingly undivided in its aim to transcend inequality altogether. As Martin Hägglund shows in his analysis of the Derridean à venir, the arrival of absolute justice or a perfect democracy would annul the temporal flux on which the survival of democracy depends. Democracy must make itself available to change and transformation. It would cease being democratic as soon as it completely resolved its internal conflicts. The full and final instantiation of democracy is undesirable because it would ultimately threaten democracy precisely by impeding the mutability and variability on which it thrives. The “perfect” democracy would be the worst democracy: a democracy that negates itself by insulating itself.

The Cosmocracy to Come

The perfect democracy may be undesirable, yet the impulse to achieve its realization remains no less robust, especially in light of what I described in the introduction as the whataboutism of contemporary posthumanist thought. Given this ampersand effect, this ceaseless inclusion of more and more to which contemporary theory commits itself, does it still make sense to talk about democracy if this word no longer limits itself to human demos? In Plant Thinking, for instance, Michael Marder advocates a “vegetal democracy” that would be “open not only to Homo sapiens but to all species without exception.”81 Not content to stop at plants, the theoretical turn toward inanimate things wants to navigate the compass even farther. The title of an essay by Timothy Morton sums it up: “Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology.”82 This promise is similar to Marder’s “phytocentrism to come,” which draws upon the decentered nature of plants (their lack of a central nervous system) in order to expand the sphere of vitality to include all life. Phytocentrism’s paradoxicalacentrism stands as a synecdoche for the growth capacity shared by every living species. As with the proclamation “here comes everything,” which does not simply describe but also performatively solicits the advent of its predicate, phytocentrism obeys a conventional messianic logic by explicitly envisioning its success.83 The Derridean à venir, by contrast, garners its strength precisely from its weakness; its lack of assurance makes its promise more robust than any declaration of infinite hospitality insofar as deconstruction says “yes” to a future that remains vulnerable to both chance and threat.84

That Derrida ponders what it might mean to extend democracy to the dead as well as the living, the inanimate as well as the animate, underscores
that the \textit{à venir} already invites the cosmocracy to come insofar as the \textit{kratos} is severed from its essential relation to the \textit{demos}. As he makes clear in an interview with Michael Sprinker, Derrida is not exclusively attached to the term \textit{democracy}. He accepts its legacy on account of its exposure to the future, its promise of an open-ended negotiation between equality and freedom, but he also acknowledges:

Perhaps the term democracy is not a good term. For now it’s the best term I’ve found. But, for example, one day I gave a lecture at Johns Hopkins on these things and a student said to me, “What you call democracy is what Hannah Arendt calls republic in order to place it in opposition to democracy.” Why not? I am only employing the term democracy in a sentence or a discourse that determines certain things. I think that in the discursive context that dominates politics today, the choice of the term that appears in the majority of sentences in this discourse is a good choice—it’s the least lousy possible. As a term, however, it’s not sacred. I can, some day or another, say, “No, it’s not the right term. The situation allows or demands that we use another term in other sentences.” For now, it’s the best term for me. And choosing this term is obviously a political choice. It’s a political action.\textsuperscript{85}

If accepting the paleonym democracy in order to renew its promise constitutes a political choice, then adopting the neopaleonym \textit{cosmocracy} is no less politically strategic. Is this term less “lousy” than \textit{democracy}, which limits its scope to presumably human \textit{demos}? When Derrida contemplates a potentially inhuman political force, he does not specifically advocate on behalf of the insentient and the inanimate. He opens the door to rocks and trees, in other words, but it seems only slightly ajar. Can we speak of petrological life? This query does not require an immediate, urgent response so much as it welcomes a porous cosmocracy to come that eschews democracy’s petrified forms.

Distinct from unconditional hospitality, cosmocracy renews the promise of an infinitely expansive inclusivity by neither declaring nor ensuring its achievement. Its porosity is also its aporosity. That unconditional hospitality is a principal rather than a practice, however, does not mean that it can be dismissed altogether. “Unconditional hospitality is impossible,” as Michael Naas puts it, but “it is the only hospitality that can give any meaning to the concept of hospitality itself and, thus, the only possible hospitality, the only one \textit{worthy of this name}.\textsuperscript{86} On the other hand, unconditional hospitality can never quite live up to its name because its practice is circumscribed by a negotiation that takes place between a finite number of
hosts and guests. Geoffrey Bennington frames this aporia as follows: “The one hospitality (the unconditional one) is worthy of the name because it just is itself, coincides with what the name names; the other (the conditional and conditioned) is worthy of the name in the sense that it is done in the name of the other, unconditional hospitality. . . . An act of hospitality is worthy of the name not because it simply coincides with its name but because it is done in the name of what it never quite is.” Bennington notes that this sense of falling short is very close to the Kantian regulative idea even though it cannot ultimately be reduced to it. How are we to keep alive the promise of the cosmocracy to come if not by striving toward some infinitely receding horizon? If this promise is not teleological, then it cannot, by the same token, be absolutely antiteleological. Every promise presupposes some aim, even if its content remains devoid of univocal meaning.

That the à venir is neither teleological nor antiteleological seems confirmed by the almost confessional tone that Derrida briefly adopts in *Rogues*: “The regulative Idea remains, for lack of anything better, if we can say ‘lack of anything better’ with regard to a regulative Idea, a last resort. Although such a last resort or final recourse risks becoming an alibi, it retains a certain dignity. I cannot swear that I will not one day give in to it.” Even though the à venir is not a principle that guides us toward some impossible ideal, Derrida cannot reassure us that he will not get buoyed away by its aspirational drift. Much depends on how one reads “Je ne jurerais pas de ne jamais y céder.” Michael Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault translate this sentence as “I cannot swear that I will not one day give in to it.” Geoffrey Bennington renders it more literally as “I would not swear never to give in to it,” a translation that has the benefit of retaining the temporal ambiguity of the original French. Has Derrida already yielded to the regulative idea? Does this describe not so much a resignation that could happen one day (in the future) as one that has already happened? Bennington also offers an alternative rendering whose temporality is even more difficult to pin down: “I would not swear that I never give in to it”: in general, on an ongoing basis, I cannot pledge that I have not been tempted to surrender to teleological yearnings.

Lest any reader jump too quickly to the conclusion that this sentence amounts to a “gotcha moment” that utterly undermines Derrida’s efforts to separate the à venir from the regulative idea, it is crucial to reiterate that the à venir does not set itself in opposition to the Kantian idea even as it remains irreducible to it. The à venir is against the Kantian idea in a double sense: the former works against and along with the latter, touches (on) it, sympathetically perhaps, even as it comes up against and thwarts its aims.
If Derrida admits to falling short of rejecting the Kantian idea—which amounts to saying that he falls short of not falling short—this miscarriage needs to be understood as something other than failure in the usual sense: what does it mean to fail to fail, to miss by not missing, or rather, by nearly missing the target toward which one all along claimed not to be aiming? Such vertiginous formulations aim to reconceive falling short as something other than a privation. Far from conceding a seduction by teleology that has already occurred or might occur at some point in the future, Derrida expresses nothing less than the autoimmune betrayal by virtue of which the rejection of teleology is no less vulnerable to contradiction than its affirmation.

This contradiction is legible on the very surface of the expressions democracy to come or cosmocracy to come, both of which depend on the principle of “minimal linguistic transparency” discussed in chapter 1. Recall that for Derrida the intelligibility of any signifier depends on a reduction to univocity that “must be recommenced indefinitely, for language neither can nor should be maintained under the protection of univocity.” This reduction to univocity must be forever resumed because irreducible equivocity is the condition of possibility and impossibility for univocity, and vice versa. The doit of Derrida’s reduction to univocity is both quasi-transcendental and normative: the reduction must and should be recommenced indefinitely because univocity cannot and should not protect itself from equivocity. As Leonard Lawlor puts it, “there is an irreducible inadequation between possibility and necessity.” The imperative of univocity attempts to put the brakes on an unstoppable equivocity. As Derrida observes, even Joyce’s radically equivocal prose depends on a minimal univocity whose failure demands its interminable renewal.

As an iterable term, democracy summons up a history of sedimented meanings whose intelligibility depends on it being at once absolutely translatable and absolutely untranslatable, totally univocal and totally equivocal. This oscillation is the necessary condition of its promise. Democracy may lack a “proper form,” but it must and should be promised as a minimally transparent, iterable concept in order that it have any future at all. On the one hand, democracy is fundamentally “aporetic in its structure (force without force, incalculable singularity and calculable equality . . . indivisible sovereignty and divisible or shared sovereignty, an empty name, a despairing messianicity or a messianicity in despair.” On the other hand, one can despair of this messianicity, one can lament the hopeless advent of the à venir, only on account of having first supplied this “empty name” with some intelligible meaning, some provisional sense that permits us to reac-
ivate the names democracy, equality, hospitality and so on. This reactivation would differ from its Husserlian understanding, which Derrida glosses as reawakening a “primordial sense” that has been buried underneath sedimented tradition. Derrida reactivates reactivation in a manner that abides the accumulated historical residue whose effacement Husserl holds onto as a horizon of impossibility: a guiding, aspirational ideal of unattainable univocity.

**Wanting Justice**

What does this simultaneous translatability and untranslatability reveal about the desire for the cosmocracy to come, this “empty name” that nevertheless harbors some promise, one that neither yields to the Kantian idea nor frontally opposes it? To address this question, I want to revisit the claim advanced by Hägglund that the struggle for a more just and inclusive world is not governed by a desire for absolute plenitude. According to Hägglund:

> Every call for justice must affirm the coming of time, which opens the chance of justice and the threat of injustice in the same stroke. The desire for justice has thus never been a desire for absolute justice. The desire for justice is always a desire for the survival of finite singularities, which violates the survival of other finite singularities. Every ideal of justice is therefore inscribed in what Derrida calls an “economy of violence.” To be sure, struggles for justice are often perpetrated in the name of absolute justice, but these claims can always be shown to be incoherent and hypocritical. There is no call for justice that does not call for the exclusion of others which means that every call for justice can be challenged and criticized. The point of this argument is not to discredit calls for justice but to recognize that these calls are always already inscribed in an economy of violence.

Hägglund wants to provide a “systematic account” of desire in Derrida that neither he nor his commentators have explored, a unifying logic that allegedly subtends his conception of the *à venir*. In developing this account, Hägglund employs a conception of undesirability that oscillates between description and prescription. Absolute justice is undesirable in a prescriptive or normative sense because it would result in an unwanted outcome: the erasure of the antinomy between freedom and equality whose survival depends on the chance of perfectibility and the threat of corruptibility. If democracy is sustained by an irremediable autoimmunitary conflict between
freedom and equality, then the “perfect” democracy would require the complete erasure of alterity: a Robinsonian isolation whereby “equality” would be fully reconciled with an unconditional, sovereign freedom. Although Derrida does not explicitly state that the perfect democracy is undesirable in a normative sense, the deleterious effects that would follow from the arrival of a democracy “cured” of its autoimmunity support the claim that the twofold chance and threat to which we must remain open implies a distinction between the desirable and the undesirable.

Shifting to a descriptive level, however, Hägglund wants to claim that absolute justice is undesirable in the sense that we are unable to desire it: “The desire for fullness has never been operative in a political struggle or anything else.” The age-old admonishment to be careful what you wish for is utterly gratuitous because Hägglund believes no one really desires political plenitude. He is certainly correct that the fight for pure justice “can always be shown to be incoherent and hypocritical,” but why can we not desire absolute justice simply because this yearning is self-refuting? It does not follow from the principle of democracy’s intrinsic mutability that “one cannot desire a state of being that is exempt from time” simply because this desire is contradictory. Since when is desire not divided, incoherent, and contradictory? One of the most basic lessons of psychoanalytic theory is that desire is forever mobile and shifting, never entirely certain of its object. That Hägglund is not unaware of this fundamental psychoanalytic insight is made clear when he claims that the desire for democracy “is essentially corruptible and inherently violent.” This corruptibility of desire, however, proves the exact opposite of what he presumes. Far from unveiling the true sense of the desire for justice, far from exposing its “proper” object, the corruptibility of desire renders untenable any desire to distinguish real from false desires. Notwithstanding assertions to the contrary, this false distinction between true and false desires cannot but “discredit calls for justice” because it refuses to credit the desire for perfect justice as a desire at all. Hägglund thus seizes upon Derrida’s association of democracy with mutability and openness, susceptibility and vulnerability, but this commandeering of democracy’s ship ironically protects it from straying off course. Despite claiming to promote a “hypopolitical logic that spells out that nothing is unscathed or unquestionable,” he exempts desire from corruptibility and autoimmunity, which is to say that he exempts it from temporality altogether.

One can only translate the untranslatable sense of the desire for democracy into an absolute transparency by force of a sovereign desire to unveil the truth of desire: “To desire democracy is by definition to desire some-
thing temporal, since democracy must remain open to its own alteration in order to be democratic [my emphasis].” This effort to pin down the meaning of the desire for democracy is far removed from the minimal transparency or univocity on whose necessity Derrida insists. Although the intelligibility of the desire for democracy depends on it “allotting its share to univocity,” this minimal transparency neither can nor should be protected from desire’s irreducible equivocity. Desire is by definition indefinable. The aim of desire, its proper object, is always à venir. To identify its aim here and now is to grant language a referential function fundamentally at odds with différence. The desire for desire’s referential truth disavows the iterability of the sign, its structurally intrinsic alterity that depends precisely on the coming of time whose twofold chance and threat Hägglund otherwise wants to affirm.

The delimitation of the desire for democracy is undemocratic not simply because a sovereign agent appoints himself the arbiter of true and false desires, but more fundamentally because this “proper” definition disavows desire’s improprierness, its inherent dispossession. That desire is “the desire of the other,” as Kojève and Lacan have taught us, means that it never fully belongs to us. Mediated through the desires of others, “our” desire is fundamentally expropriated. Desire is never sovereign for the same reason that sovereignty is never sovereign: both are always already divided by alterity. No one indeed has ever desired absolute justice, but not because the predicate of this desire is fully determinable. No one has ever desired absolute justice—or desired anything else for that matter—because desire has always belonged to no one.

The drive to unveil the alleged descriptive undesirability of unconditional justice thus overlooks a far more radical undesirability. When Lacan and Kojève claim that we desire desire, they figure desire as the object of a desiring subject. This capacity for desire is said to elevate humans above animals, whose aims are allegedly reducible to self-preservation. While Kojève employs the term desire to characterize both human and animal intentionality, Lacan less charitably distinguishes human desire from animal “need.” Animals lack desire just as they lack language. Yet desire is not merely one object of desire among others. Humans no more “have” desire than they do language. Lack is the condition of desire, but desire also names what we lack. Desire is a privation rather than a possession. Desire is an impouvoir, a nonpower or not-being-able. This impouvoir is not the same as powerlessness. It corresponds to a certain weakness and vulnerability, an exposure to forces beyond ourselves to which we yield, for better or worse. As Derek Attridge puts it, desire is an arrivant: it comes
from elsewhere, from the alterity of conscious and unconscious investments whose ownness is permanently displaced. Desire is not an ability or capacity that belongs to an agential subject. An originary undesirability is the condition of impossibility of desire as such. *Desire is undesirable.*

**The Scandal of Desire**

The cosmocracy *to come* is both *hic et nunc* and infinitely deferred. Promised in the name of what never fully arrives, cosmocracy is worthy of the name only insofar as it remains unworthy of the name. Whereas the antiteleological desire for a continuously perfectible and corruptible justice to come confidently asserts its incorruptibility, its capacity not to surrender to any teleological yearnings, the weak nonteleological desire for the cosmocracy to come is far less self-assured and confident, far less eager to pledge its unswerving desire never to fall short of falling short.

Whitman’s desire to broaden democracy beyond the human warrants redescribing this impulse as cosmocratic. While this desire is just as resilient as Hägglund’s antiteleological counterpart, occasionally Whitman loses his swagger and concedes cosmocracy’s fragility and vulnerability. *Leaves of Grass* employs a central botanical metaphor of singular leaves composing a common, democratic ground. Yet this harmony is not always welcomed by the poetic voice. In “This Compost,” for instance, the speaker withdraws from the earth because he is repulsed by the thought that corpses are buried within it:

O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?
How can you be alive you growths of spring?
How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain?
Are they not continually putting distemper’d corpses within you?
Is not every continent work’d over and over with sour dead?  

Here the speaker eschews earthly union in a manner that ironically recalls Lawrence’s repudiation of Whitman: “I don’t want all those things inside me, thank you.” Whitman seems to reject the “foul liquid and meat” of the dead just as Lawrence does the “awful pudding of One Identity.” While critics following Lawrence’s lead have often admonished Whitman for promoting an “‘imperial self,’ an ego spreading outward,” Killingsworth suggests that a different Whitman appears in these verses, “a poet of limits.” How are we to understand these borders? Are they
reducible to the xenophobia that we have seen elsewhere in Whitman? To be sure, something of the cosmocratic promise remains once the speaker recognizes:

Perhaps every mite has once form’d part of a sick person—yet behold!
The grass of spring covers the prairies,
The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,
The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,
The apple-buds cluster together on the apple-branches,
The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves.¹¹⁷

These lines seem to revitalize botanical merger, yet the speaker never entirely recovers from his initial xenophobia: “Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,/It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions.”¹¹⁸ The speaker’s expressed fear of “every spear of grass”—which is to say every singular other who/that threatens to pierce “the imperial self”—can also be read as conveying a more literal terror in the face of what Killingsworth calls earth’s “thingishness.”¹¹⁹ Insofar as the earth continues to rotate with or without us, its inhuman indifference is an unwelcome reminder of human mortality. The earth “turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless/successions of diseas’d corpses,/It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,/It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptu-/ous crops,/It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings/from them at last.”¹²⁰ Barring a collision with a rogue planet such as Melancholia, the earth will survive the death of each finite singularity, at least according to the poet’s vision of the world’s “stainless,” eternal rotation.¹²¹

Yet perhaps the earth also terrifies the poet precisely because its eternal survival, its continuous turn, is no more guaranteed than that of democracy, which, as Derrida frequently insists, is defined by:

[a] rotary motion . . . that turns on itself around a fixed axis. . . . It seems difficult to think the desire for or the naming of any democratic space without what is called in Latin a rota . . . without the rotary motion of some quasi-circular return or rotation toward the self, toward the origin itself, toward and upon the self of the origin, whenever it is a question, for example, of sovereign self-determination, of the autonomy of the self, of the ipse, namely, of the one-self that gives itself its own law.¹²²
In addition to this turn toward the self as origin, democracy’s circularity also turns on a lack of proper meaning that operates like “a disengaged clutch, freewheeling. . . . And so it is defined only by turns, by tropes, by tropism.” Moreover, this tropism is likewise inscribed in the turn qua alternation between freedom and equality, an oscillation that does not simply mark a torsion between the unconditional and the conditional, but also the turning of these concepts within and against themselves.

Whitman similarly figures cosmocracy in terms of the irresistible revolution of the earth, a desire whose “true” meaning cannot be arrested: a perpetual tropism that defies any Ptolemaic effort to center the meaning of desire, to prevent the desire for absolute justice from turning on or against itself. One can thus draw an axis directly from the desire to eliminate injustice all the way through to the sovereign self-determination to eliminate the desire to eliminate all injustice. To claim that a perfectly just world is undesirable because it would result in an atemporal, inalterable state is to say that we cannot want it because it will terminate the rotational movement on which democracy, as it were, rests. Absolute justice is thus retained as a regulative idea, only now its purpose is overturned: its portended injustice is meant to regulate us into not wanting it precisely because it has been found wanting. Yet it can only be found wanting by claiming to have unearthed its true meaning at the expense of leaving unturned its other tropic leavings.

One may pledge never to yield to teleology, but this desire not to be ensnared is no less corruptible than the most explicit affirmation of absolute justice itself. A promise that protects itself from corruptibility is no promise at all. Corruptibility has no opposite: no incorruptible side that would reveal the truth of the desire that animates every promise. The “perfect” egalitarian ethico-political condition may amount to a solipsistic nightmare in which freedom and equality coincide only on account of eliminating all others. That no desire is utterly transparent to itself, however, means that we cannot completely rule out the possibility that this seemingly undesirable state nevertheless names one possible desire among others.

Although we will never be in a position to know that we have included everything, it does not follow that we cannot want the impossible. It no more falls to us to determine the truth of our desires than it would to the “sovereign” human to adjudicate cosmocracy’s achievement. This judgment would ironically close things off by granting the human the power to calculate the final sum of those deemed worthy of ethical consideration. The necessary porosity of cosmocratic borders resonates to some extent with Matthew Calarco’s notion of an “agnostic ethics,” a Levinasian inspired
openness to the question of who or what has a face.\textsuperscript{124} This agnosticism is not based on “the positive claim that all things or all life forms do count.”\textsuperscript{125} On the contrary, he maintains that the question of ethical consideration ought to remain “wide open.”\textsuperscript{126} Calarco’s conception of openness, however, tends to mute the role of decision and calculation in ethics: “We are obliged to proceed from the possibility that anything might take on a face. And we are further obliged to hold this possibility permanently open” because the scope of ethical concern “cannot be determined with any finality.”\textsuperscript{127} The borders that demarcate the sphere of ethical concern may not be fully decidable, but this indetermination cannot and should not warrant avoiding decisions or refusing to invoke specific criteria as a condition of moral consideration—however contestable and revisable such criteria always remain. We must “decide” the undecidable, which means that ethical agnosticism is contaminated from the start. Calarco seems to concede as much when he remarks that his decision to focus on animals risks undermining universal ethical respect. He is right to resist the tendency of analytic philosophers to invoke criteria that “cleanly demarcate those beings who belong to the community of moral patients from those beings who do not [my emphasis].”\textsuperscript{128} Yet this lack of clean demarcation cannot be the basis for abandoning criteria altogether. The criterion of sentience, for example, tacitly subtends Calarco’s attention to animal suffering. The inescapable impurity of ethical agnosticism entails that we are “bound to make mistakes” when we exclude some beings from moral consideration, even though Calarco explicitly suggests that agnosticism can assist us in avoiding them.\textsuperscript{129} Only an impossible, unconditional agnosticism could avoid mistakes altogether. We must strive to preserve the possibility that anything might have a face, even though we continually “decide” that some beings and entities do not according to a range of criteria that calculate the incalculable. Have not both omnivores and vegetarians already said “no” to plants by eating them? Do I know that plants do not have a face? No. But I am reasonably confident in my belief that they do not, certain enough that my (irreducible) belief rightly passes for knowledge.

The question of belief returns us to what I characterized in chapter 1 as the co-insinuation of the \textit{as if} and the \textit{as such}—the phantasm and its corresponding “truth.” That mistakes are inevitable means that this book has proceeded \textit{as if} its chosen literary texts and films are more germane to the question of the human’s place within posthumanism than others might have been. In contrast to the cold calculations of the litanizer, my textual selections reflect a leap of faith whose lack of assurances affirms discriminatory, “arbitrary” decisions as the condition of hospitality as such. As I
noted previously, this arbitrariness should not be equated with pure chance, but rather with judgments that arbitrate according to beliefs whose veracity remains continuously debatable. The weak posthumanism of these decisions does not hesitate with regard to the human’s urgent decentering. It does not convey a desire (at least a conscious one) to safeguard the human from its deconstruction. On the contrary, its weakness reflects an ironic power that aims to deflate the ultrahumanism of those posthumans who “know” too much about the human. They are ultimately too little of faith precisely because they credit the human’s capacity for self-abandonment as if it amounted to the truth of posthuman capaciousness as such.

Capaciousness is capability itself. There is no making room for the nonhuman without a human giving itself the capacity to play host at the “cosmic party” to which everything is allegedly now invited. I began by considering how posthumanist theories of immanence circumnavigate the human only to run aground on their scandalous desire to evade the scandal of the human. Are we now any further from the shores of the human than when we embarked? What will have been the measure of our success or failure? Has the human been erased “like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea”? Or does its successful effacement remain no more determinable than the origin of the footprint whose trace disturbs Crusoe’s solitude? Surely we hope that we have landed on the archipelago of a lesser or weaker humanism even if we remain linked to the island of human narcissism from whence we came.

Posthumanist immanence boards the ship of cosmocracy hoping to sail unhindered through the aporia of the human, the nonpassage that in Greek is often associated with inaccessible waterways and seas. Yet the desire to steer around the desire for an entirely equitable, nonhierarchical world is no less encumbered. It seeks to make land according to its “logic” of desire, which is to say its logos of desire, precisely by making fast desire’s irrevocably unmoorable aims. We must therefore not conclude that no one has ever heard the posthumanist siren song, that its seduction amounts to little more than a false consciousness that awaits us to fathom its true, submerged desire. While some posthumanist theories demand the imminent arrival of an immanent, untroubled ethico-political condition, others posit it as belatedly achievable once the human is fully decentered. This deferred dream thereby seeks to make the future present by “knowing” its destination in advance. It may seem that this long-sought perfect justice lies leagues apart from the desire to repudiate this yearning altogether, yet both desires are no more impervious to time’s roll and pitch than is the promise of justice itself. Whereas the ship of democracy requires a helmsman with a “good
strong hand and wary eye” to steer it toward its foreseeable and inevitable landing, the ship of cosmocracy sails toward justice in a manner that cannot protect it from the elements. This ship can never perfectly ballast the competing demands that issue from countless others—human or animal, organic or inorganic—beings and entities who call on us to see the cosmocratic vista anew. They implore us not only to reexamine who or what we ought to embrace, but also to limn the fading horizon that separates whom from what. Navigating the rough waters on which we both steady and list, we must tack our ship directly into the erratic winds by whose force justice sinks or swims—ceaselessly borne back toward the cosmocracy always to come.