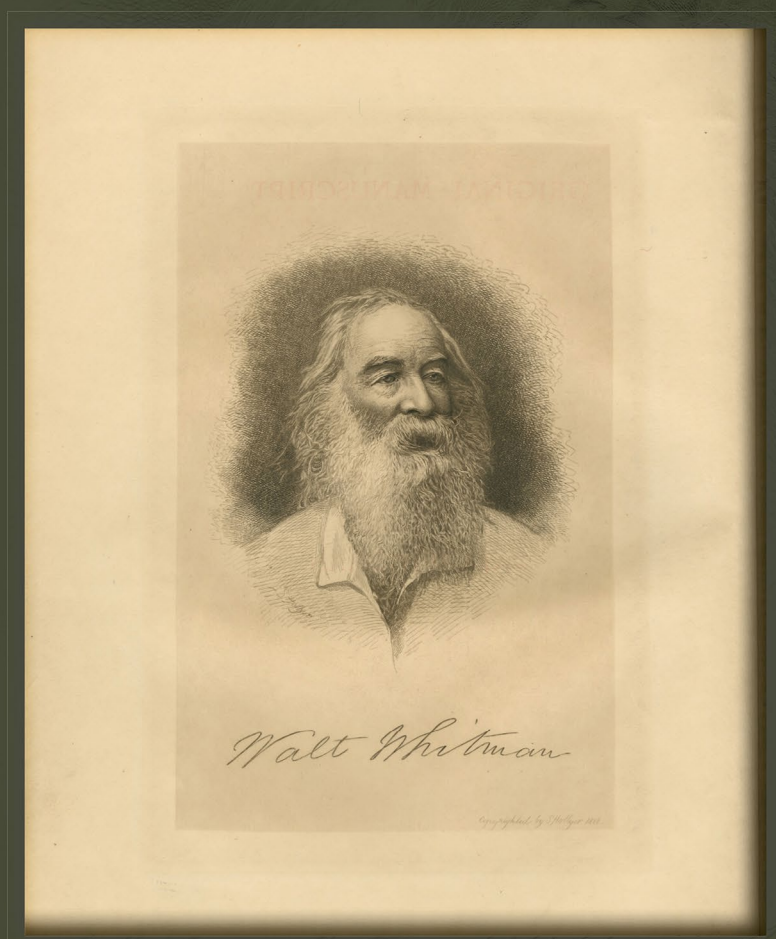


DIVINE STYLE
WALT WHITMAN AND THE
KING JAMES BIBLE

F. W. DOBBS-ALLSOPP





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Cover image: Copy of an engraving of Walt Whitman from Codex Ms263. The codex contains the holograph original of Whitman's late essay, "The Bible as Poetry." Although the engraving is not credited in the manuscript, it appears to be a copy of one done by Samuel Hollyer in April 1888, based on a photograph of Whitman by Jacob Spieler at the Charles H. Spieler Studio, ca. 1876.

Background Image: "The Bible as Poetry," Codex Ms263. Both images courtesy of the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.

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Introduction

"The interior & foundation quality of the man [Walt Whitman] is Hebraic, Biblical, mystic"

— Walt Whitman, "Introduction to the London Edition" (1867)

"Suppose the comparative method applied to such ~~an order~~ a theory & practice of poetry as Walt Whitman's, and ~~a new~~ floods of light are forthwith ^{thr}own on what would otherwise be puzzling & dark"

— Walt Whitman, "Is Walt Whitman's Poetry Poetical?" (1874)

Having recently celebrated the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible (2011) and the 200th anniversary of Walt Whitman's birth (2019), it is fitting to take a fresh look at what has been one of the oldest preoccupations of Whitman scholarship: the nature and extent of the KJB's influence on Whitman and his mature style, especially as manifested in the early editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman was an inveterate collagist of outside writing, an appropriator of found language, extracting "phrases and lines that attracted him, and in the process of moving them from their initial sources into new contexts, he filtered and changed their tone and meaning."¹ His sources are manifold and diverse, ranging from an ornithological guidebook to newspaper reports of Civil War battles, Ralph Waldo Emerson's lectures and essays, George Sand's *The Countess of Rudolstadt*, and Jules Michelet's *The People* and *The Bird*, to cite some of the better documented examples.² It is therefore no surprise that the English Bible, which Whitman counted among the finest poetry of the world ("I don't know but the deepest

1 Matt Miller, *Collage of Myself* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2010), 86; see also Paul Zweig, *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 151–52.

2 See Miller, *Collage of Myself*, 26, 79–103; Zweig, *Walt Whitman*, 143–63; and esp. Floyd Stovall, *The Foreground of Leaves of Grass* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974).

and widest")³ and which he noted he "went over thoroughly" during "summers and falls" at "Long Island's seashores," should be for him another source of found language, imagery, themes, rhythm, and style to mine and mold and mobilize into *Leaves*. Indeed, it may well be, as G. W. Allen states, that "no book is more conspicuous in Walt Whitman's 'long foreground' than the King James Bible."⁴

It has certainly become a common trope among Whitman scholars and biographers to reference summarily some vague and probably unconscious influence of the Bible on Whitman's writing. Matt Miller's version of the trope is typical: "That Whitman was aware that his line seemed biblical is undeniable, and he was surely influenced, even if only unconsciously, by English translations of the Bible's Hebraic rhythms."⁵ Such statements are usually prefaced by the intimation of a prolonged history of discussion—implicit justification for the abbreviated comment—and are often accompanied by expressions of dissatisfaction with the overall thesis or its implications ("But the Bible of course must have always been present as a potential influence in Whitman's mind, so....").⁶ However, aside from Allen's two groundbreaking essays from the early 1930s, "Biblical Analogies for Walt Whitman's Prosody" (1933) and "Biblical Echoes in Whitman's Works" (1934), and T. E. Crawley's initial statement on the "Christ-Symbol" in *Leaves* in a chapter of his *The Structure of Leaves of Grass*

3 CPW, 379.

4 *A Reader's Guide to Walt Whitman* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1970), 24.

5 *Collage of Myself*, 25. Already in 1933 Allen can summon an early version of the trope: "Many critics have ventured opinions on the influence of the Bible on Whitman's versification...." ("Biblical Analogies for Walt Whitman's Prosody," *Revue Anglo-Américaine* 6 [1933], 490–507, at 490). And again in his *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (rev ed; New York: New York University, 1967 [1955]), 144), though now only requiring parenthetical notice: "In his early free verse experiments he may have used several literary sources (certainly including the King James Bible), but...." Stovall offers yet another version of the trope: "There is abundant evidence that Whitman was familiar with the Bible both as a young man and later" (*Foreground*, 56).

6 Miller, *Collage of Myself*, 25. C. Carroll Hollis is even more dismissive: the language that was formational for the early *Leaves*, he maintains, was not "that of the Bible, which he [Whitman] seems to have venerated or even studied only in old age, when he touted the Bible to pick up a little credit for *Leaves* by a sort of cultural back-formation" (*Language and Style in Leaves of Grass* [Baton Rouge/London: Louisiana State University, 1983], 205).

(1970), there has been no substantive published treatment of the general topic.⁷

The subject is an old one, dating at least as far back as 1860 where an unsigned review in the Boston *Cosmopolite* remarks, "In respect of plain speaking, and in most respects, *Leaves* more resembles the Hebrew Scriptures than do any other modern writings."⁸ Other brief notices in contemporary reviews followed.⁹ Whitman himself, as just noted, makes explicit meta-references to the Bible (more on this in Chapter One). Beginning with Bliss Perry in 1906, Whitman's many biographers have routinely noticed his knowledge and use of the Bible.¹⁰ Finally, a

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- 7 Allen, "Biblical Analogies," 490–507; "Biblical Echoes in Whitman's Works," *American Literature* 6 (1934), 302–15; T. E. Crawley, *The Structure of Leaves of Grass* (Austin: University of Texas, 1970), esp. 27–49, 50–79.
 - 8 4 August 1860 (page number unknown), <https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/lg1860/anc.00037.html>; reprinted in Richard Maurice Bucke, *Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1883), 200–01; and also in Milton Hindus, *Walt Whitman* (New York/London: Routledge, 1997), 103–04; cf. Kenneth Price, *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 108. There is also a slightly earlier passing notice of Whitman as "too Hebraic to be polite" by his friend G. S. Phillips ("Literature. Leaves of Grass—by Walt Whitman," *New York Illustrated News* 2 [26 May 1860], 43, <https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/lg1860/anc.01068.html>; reprinted in Walt Whitman, *A Child's Reminiscence* [T. O. Mabbott and R. G. Silver, eds.; Seattle: University of Washington, 1930], 33.
 - 9 William D. O'Connor, "Walt Whitman," *The New York Times* (2 December 1866), 2, <https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/lg1867/anc.00064.html>. O'Connor, of course, by this time had become a close friend of Whitman's and one of his staunch defenders, and thus his notice of the poet's similarities to "the poetic diction of the Hebraic muse" strongly implies Whitman's own conscious awareness of the same); Robert Buchanan, *David Gray and Other Essays* (London, 1868), 207; William Michael Rossetti, "Prefatory Notice" in *Poems by Walt Whitman* (London: John Camden Hotten, Piccadilly, 1868), 6, <https://whitmanarchive.org/published/books/other/rossetti.html>; George Saintsbury, "Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1871)," *The Academy* 6 (10 October 1874), 398–400, <https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/lg1871/anc.00076.html>; Anonymous, "Walt Whitman, a Kosmos," *The Springfield Sunday Republican* (13 November 1881), 4, <https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/lg1881/anc.00208.html>; G. E. M., "Whitman, Poet and Seer," *The New York Times* (22 January 1882), 4, <https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/lg1881/anc.00216.html>; R. L. Stevenson, *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1882), 106, 120–21; R. M. Bucke, *Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1883), 103, 119, 185; W. Harrison, "Walt Whitman's 'November Boughs,'" *The Critic* n.s. 11 (19 January 1889), 25, <https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/boughs/anc.00123.html>; Oscar Wilde, "The Gospel According to Walt Whitman," *The Pall Mall Gazette* (25 January 1889), 3, <https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/boughs/anc.00124.html>.
 - 10 *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906).

number of briefer notices of various sorts (e.g., specific allusions to the Bible in Whitman, Whitman's prophetic voice) have been published over the years. But this is about the sum of it. In general, scholarship on the topic of the Bible and Whitman is actually rather thin and, even at its best—as in Allen's early articles and in his several restatements over the course of his career—often problematic. In fact, M. N. Posey in his 1938 dissertation comes essentially to the same conclusion: general assertions of Whitman's debt to the English Bible, though multiple and varied, "have not usually been followed by careful investigation and massing of evidence."¹¹ I cannot see that things have changed greatly in the intervening eighty years since Posey's statement. My impression is that this remains a subject that would repay the kind of detailed philological treatment that Posey calls for (and in part delivers) and which has been paid to the question of the English Bible in other writers (e.g., Shakespeare, Melville).¹²

My own ambition for what follows is more modest and framed explicitly from the perspective of an outsider, that of a biblical scholar and not a Whitman specialist. Biblical and Whitman specialists have much in common (e.g., how they read texts, the diachronic orientation of their research). Both also curate disciplinary-specific knowledge that is difficult for the non-specialist to assimilate fully, no matter how patient and persistent the research. Here I seek to leverage the field-specific knowledge of a biblicist in querying Whitman's literary debt to the KJB. No (Hebrew) Bible scholar can read *Leaves of Grass* and fail to hear and feel its familiar rhythms, style, and, at times, even manner of phrasing.¹³ My aim will be to give these impressions some more precise articulation and illustration. In the end, I think Allen's strong intuition, however much he hedges in the name of scholarly propriety, that Whitman's debt to the KJB is substantial and significant is correct.

11 "Whitman's Debt to the Bible with Special Reference to the Origins of His Rhythm" (unpubl. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas, 1938), 1.

12 E.g., Ilana Pardes, *Melville's Bibles* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008); H. Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013).

13 The Israeli poet Shin Shalom refracts this same sensibility when he states, "Whitman's pioneering is very close to us, and so are his Biblical rhythms. To translate him into Hebrew is like translating a writer back into his own language" (*New York Herald Tribune Book Review* [26 March 1950], 3).

My efforts here are offered in the spirit of Allen's own project, to the same end, and in admiration of his perceptions.

Since the post-1995 re(dis)covery of some of Whitman's lost notebooks, scholars have been able to narrow the timeframe for the emergence of Whitman's mature style to the early 1850s.¹⁴ With the aid of the notebooks and early poetry manuscripts, exciting glimpses of this new style can be seen evolving on the page. Still, what provoked these writing experiments that would culminate in the 1855 *Leaves* remains as ever a mystery, perhaps not entirely by accident. It is nonetheless the case, in anticipation of the conclusions reached in what follows and stated most positively, that those aspects most reminiscent of the English Bible—Whitman's signature long lines, the prevalence of parallelism and the "free" rhythms it helps create, his prosiness and tendency towards parataxis, aspects of diction and phrasing, and the decidedly lyrical bent of the entire project—are all characteristics of the style that begin to emerge in the immediate run-up to the 1855 *Leaves* and come into full bloom in that volume (and the succeeding two editions of the *Leaves*), but which are either entirely absent or not prominent in Whitman's earlier writings (prose and poetry). And what is more, in almost every instance, as far as I can tell, what Whitman takes from the Bible he reshapes, recasts, extends, molds, modifies—even contorts and warps, such that it becomes his own. That is, this is the kind of collaging that Miller notes is "essential" to Whitman's "writing process," and thus by its nature such taking—in many instances at least—often requires the sense and sensibility of a Hebraist for its detection and (fuller) appreciation. Whitman's use of the English Bible cannot of its own fully account for the genius of his mature style, but it seems to me to be an impactful force in shaping key aspects of this style.

* * *

Chapter One provides a preliminary brief for Whitman's familiarity with the Bible. While there is a longstanding consensus among Whitman scholars on this issue, it nevertheless seems appropriate to begin with the "massing of evidence" called for by Posey. The ensuing survey is

14 A.L. Birney, "Missing Whitman Notebooks Returned to Library of Congress," *WWQR* 12 (1995), 217–29.

somewhat eclectic (e.g., connecting Whitman with known or currently extant bibles) but it focuses in the main on Whitman's own meta-discourse about the Bible and features an extended look at his late and under-appreciated essay, "The Bible as Poetry" (1883).¹⁵ In particular, I seek to discern what of the sentiments expressed about the Bible in this essay (e.g., Whitman's awareness of the lack of rhyme in biblical poetry) may be traced back to the germinal period of *Leaves'* inception. In the process, I begin identifying aspects of Whitman's style that may be indebted (to varying degrees) to the Bible (e.g., his preference for lyric). I close the chapter by spotlighting the coincidence of Whitman's breaking into free verse in 1850 while writing three biblically inflected poems. And though I do not elaborate on this free verse or Whitman's proclivity for the lyric, that both offer substantial links to the Bible should not go unnoticed. Whitman collages all manner of language material, especially those aspects of form and structure that are not oversaturated with semantic uptake.

Chapter Two takes up the topic of biblical quotations, allusions, and echoes in Whitman's writings, albeit with a very specific end in view. Allen pioneered this line of research in his "Biblical Echoes," which remains the single largest published collection of biblical quotations, allusions, and echoes in Whitman.¹⁶ This sampling alone establishes Whitman's knowledge and use of the Bible, and the direct quotations from the Bible make clear Whitman's use of the KJB translation in particular. Allen also ably emphasizes the "elusive" nature of Whitman's allusive practice in *Leaves* as it pertains to the Bible.¹⁷ My own point of departure is the (modest amount of) research carried out on this topic since Allen's foundational study. I begin by elaborating a number of general observations that entail from these more recent studies, not a few of which contrast with emphases placed by Allen (e.g., the prominence of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in Whitman's collages from the Bible). The chapter's principal focus is on the important period from 1850–55. A survey of Whitman's writings

15 *The Critic* 3 (3 February 1883), 57; later collected in *November Boughs* ([Philadelphia: David McKay, 1888], 43–46) and in *CPW*, 379–82.

16 "Biblical Echoes," 302–15.

17 Allen, "Biblical Echoes," 303; cf. B. L. Bergquist, "Walt Whitman and the Bible: Language Echoes, Images, Allusions, and Ideas" (unpubl. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1979), 81, 133. "Elusive" is his term.

(both poetry and prose) from this period reveals a plethora of biblical language, imagery, themes, characters, and imitations of all sorts, and this allusive practice turns out to be a very tangible way of tracking one dimension of Whitman's evolving poetic theory—"no quotations." At the time of the three free-verse poems from the spring and summer of 1850, Whitman could still freely embed quotations from the Bible in his poems. But by the time of the early notebooks and poetry manuscripts, and then in the 1855 *Leaves*, Whitman's new poetics is firmly in place: no more direct quotations, a concerted trimming away of some biblical trappings, and a tendency to work-over allusions to the point that they become, as B. L. Bergquist says, "more 'elusive,' more hidden."¹⁸ The survey includes close scrutiny of Whitman's prose writings (mostly journalistic in nature) from 1850–53 and the early pre-*Leaves* notebooks and unpublished poetry manuscripts.

The question of the origin of Whitman's signature long line remains shrouded in mystery. The renewed attention paid to the early notebooks and poetry manuscripts has enabled scholars to see much more clearly the emergence of that line and to have a better idea of its rough chronology. But what of this line's inspiration? Its animating impulse? Where does it come from? And why? The evidence at hand does not permit conclusive answers to these and related questions. Still, in Chapter Three I probe the possibility that the KJB played a role in shaping Whitman's ideas about his emerging line. In particular, I build on an insight of George Saintsbury who, in a review of the 1871 (–72) edition of *Leaves*, calls attention to the likeness of Whitman's line to "the verse divisions of the English Bible, especially in the poetical books."¹⁹ A number of aspects of Whitman's mature line (e.g., its variability, range of lengths, typical shapes and character, and content), I argue, become more clearly comparable to the Bible when thought through in light of Saintsbury's appreciation of the significance of the actual "verse divisions of the English Bible." Along the way I sketch the chronological development of Whitman's line, emphasizing the poet's break with meter as key to opening the possibility for a longer line, and consider other possible means by which knowledge about the Bible beyond direct

18 "Whitman and the Bible," 81.

19 Saintsbury, "Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1871)," 398–400.

readerly encounters may have been mediated to Whitman, such as in the poetry of James Macpherson and Martin Farquhar Tupper.

Galway Kinnell observes that Whitman is “the greatest virtuoso of parallel structure in English poetry.”²⁰ Allen’s early essay, “Biblical Analogies,” successfully establishes the presence and significance of parallelism in Whitman, especially as it bears upon the poet’s underlying prosody, and the likelihood that the Bible is an important source of Whitman’s knowledge of parallelism. In that analysis, parallelism is understood primarily through Robert Lowth’s biblical paradigm.²¹ Unfortunately, that paradigm was already much belated in 1933, then a full 180 years after Lowth’s initial exposition of it. Moreover, Allen’s own explication of the paradigm—mediated at second- and third-hand—is flawed in various ways. And compounding these problems is the fact that the understanding of parallelism in Whitman scholarship more broadly appears to be essentially that of Allen (with a few exceptions), and thus is dated and shot through with problematic assumptions. The overriding ambition of Chapter Four, then, is to re-situate the study of parallelism in Whitman. The initial part of the chapter is dedicated to explicating Lowth’s paradigm and its critical reception in modern biblical scholarship. I do this because of the foundational role which the biblical paradigm has played in Whitman scholarship and because Hebrew Bible is one of the few disciplines of textual study where parallelism as a literary phenomenon has been robustly theorized. The analytics of parallelism, regardless of its originating textual source, is portable, as Allen rightly perceived. The main body of the chapter, building on the foregoing overview, seeks to discern more precisely what may have devolved from the Bible in Whitman’s understanding and use of parallelism. The final section of the chapter features exploratory observations about how Whitman moves beyond the biblical paradigm he inherits and molds parallelism to suit his own poetic ends.

20 “‘Strong is Your Hold’: My Encounters with Whitman” in *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays* (eds. S. Belasco and K. M. Price; Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2007), 417–28.

21 *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (2 vols.; trans. G. Gregory; London: J. Johnson, 1787; reprinted in *Robert Lowth (1710–1787): The Major Works*, vols. 1–2 [London: Routledge, 1995]).

In the book's last chapter, I turn to an examination of stylistic elements in Whitman's verse that derive (ultimately) from the plain style of the KJB's prose. My point of departure is Robert Alter's *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible*, in which the author argues for the existence of an "American prose style" among major American novelists that descends from the KJB.²² Whitman as a poet is not considered by Alter, and yet, there are ways in which the style of Whitman's poetry, especially in the early editions of *Leaves*, shares much with the prose style charted by Alter, albeit in a nonnarrative mode and with a decidedly political bent—an American prose style poeticized and politicized. The chapter begins by tracing Whitman's self-denominated "plate-glassy style" back, first, to the plain style of the KJB and, ultimately, to William Tyndale (d. 1536), the first to translate the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible into English and the primordial source of the stylistic distinctiveness of the KJB's prose. The main body of the chapter surveys leading elements of Whitman's style that may be tied to the KJB, including his use of parallelism, parataxis, the periphrastic *of*-genitive, and the cognate accusative. I also stress the important difference of poetry in how and what is inherited from the prose tradition of the KJB and how that inheritance may manifest itself. What Whitman helps to illuminate, in light of Alter's identification of an American prose style devolved from the KJB, is the possibilities for that style beyond the narrative mode. Next, I reflect on the place of prose in Whitman's poetry and argue that Whitman may be viewed properly as participating in the prose tradition that Alter identifies, even if in the end Whitman's poetic style diverges, strikingly in places, from that of the novelists in the tradition. I close by emphasizing Whitman's political investment in his style. For Alter the term "American" in the subtitle of his book serves chiefly as a descriptor of nationality and to delineate a style of written prose characteristic of novelists with this nationality. For Whitman, by contrast, "American" as a descriptor is always thoroughly politicized. As the poet culls stylistic elements from the prose of the KJB and reinscribes them in his "great psalm of the republic" (*LG*, iv), he saturates them with political "stuff" such that upon reading (and rereading) they are themselves political acts of consequence and incitements toward still other such acts. Indeed,

22 Princeton: Princeton University, 2010.

throughout the volume I notice how frequently Whitman's gleanings from the Bible (e.g., parallelism, free verse, parataxis, end-stopping) are infused with and give expression to the political. The poet's biblical borrowings are part and parcel of the political alchemy that charges his "barbaric yawp."

* * *

The main aim of this study is to measure the KJB's impact on Whitman's poetic style, especially as it is developing in the immediate run-up to the 1855 *Leaves* and during the period of the first three editions more generally. The style of Whitman's later poems shifts dramatically in places (e.g., shorter lines, more conventional punctuation, less aversion to stock phrases) and a full accounting of the stylistic debt Whitman owes to the English Bible would require an equally substantial engagement with these later materials. In my brief closing "Afterword" I gesture toward this fuller accounting to come through a reading of Whitman's late (and posthumously published) "Death's Valley" (1889),²³ a poem simultaneously provoked by George Inness's painting, "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" (1867)²⁴ and the psalm of the latter's inspiration, including that most mesmerizing of the KJB's mistranslations, "the valley of the shadow of death," which Whitman deftly (and unbiblically) rephrases in his title.

23 *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 84 (April 1892), 707–09, <https://whitmanarchive.org/published/periodical/poems/per.00028>.

24 <http://emuseum.vassar.edu/objects/59/the-valley-of-the-shadow-of-death>.