

Tanya Domi: Hi. This is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: This week's guest is David Reynolds, the Distinguished Professor of American Literature and U.S. History at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is author of *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, winner of the Bancroft Prize and the Ambassador Book Award, and finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His other books include *John Brown: Abolitionist*, winner of the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Prize; *Waking Giant: America in the Age of Jackson*; *Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and Battle for America*; *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*; *Walt Whitman*; and *Lincoln's Selected Writings in Norton Critical Edition*. Professor Reynolds' articles and reviews have appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Atlantic*, *Huffington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and elsewhere.

Tanya Domi: Welcome to The Thought Project, David Reynolds.

David Reynolds: Very nice to be here. Thank you.

Tanya Domi: You have had a busy spring this year, speaking about the 160th anniversary of the John Brown raid on Harpers Ferry as well as his death by hanging and the quickly-approaching Walt Whitman celebration of his 200th birthday here in Brooklyn. You recently delivered a keynote address at the Detroit Mercy School of Law to commemorate the meaning of the abolitionists that included not only John Brown, but Frederick Douglass and William Webb, who met in that fateful year of 1859 to set a course for a group of really committed people to abolish and end slavery.

Tanya Domi: Tell us about this meeting and tell us, why did the abolitionists choose a raid at Harpers Ferry?

David Reynolds: The meeting happened after John Brown had actually stolen a bunch of slaves, or emancipated a bunch of slaves in Missouri and had taken them 1,200 miles across the nation to Detroit, where they were put on the Detroit River to Canada for freedom. John Brown was an abolitionist, but not just any abolitionist. He was the only one who really consistently took up arms against slavery before the Civil War. He was a white man. He had a family. He had a total of 20 children, but he was totally committed to getting rid of slavery.

David Reynolds: When he was in Detroit, he arranged a meeting with Frederick Douglass, who was giving a lecture there, in the home of the African-American reformer William Webb, and then there were several other African-Americans there and they talked over their plans. One gentleman suggested that they blow up 100

churches in the South as a form of terrorism. But John Brown wanted to raid Harpers Ferry, Virginia, which was a slave region at the time, go down there with 21 men followers, emancipate slaves in the region, and then take these slaves into the nearby Shenandoah Mountains, part of the Appalachian Range that runs all the way from Maine to Georgia.

David Reynolds: His idea was he could run some of the slaves who wanted to go north, up north through the mountains, but with himself, his family, and a bunch of other slave people, go down into the South, penetrate the South, and use the mountains the way, let's say, more recently Al-Qaeda has used hiding places. Hide out in the mountains, he knew the mountains very well, and kind of create a sense of panic and terror by occasionally raiding the plantations in the South. There's nothing that Southerners feared more than slave insurrection, slave revolt, and slave flight, leaving slavery. He wanted to make slavery insecure in the South so that the South would finally say, "Well, we're going to come to terms and make some kind of deal here with the North and get rid of our slaves."

Tanya Domi: He was truly an insurrectionist. The way you describe him, he's a person that yielded to or honored higher law.

David Reynolds: Yeah. At the time, the Constitution was interpreted by many people as a pro-slavery document because it has a couple ... Even though it doesn't mention slavery, it still has a few clauses in there which lend support to the institution of slavery, and laws in general had become far more pro-slavery during the 1850s, such as the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which opened up the Western territories to slavery, the Fugitive Slave Law, which made it very ... It stiffened penalties on Northerners for helping slaves who came north to escape to Canada. And then the Dredd Scott decision of 1857, which said that blacks could not be citizens of the United States and that they had no rights that white people had to respect.

David Reynolds: John Brown, who worked among blacks, lived for them, and tried to help them in every way he could, was furious and he really wanted to take action. He believed in the higher law. Higher law is the law that goes beyond written law, positive law, and his law he believed was the law of justice, and he wanted to act on that law.

Tanya Domi: It's also been documented that he met with Harriet Tubman, who was called the Moses for the underground railroad where she lived in Maryland. Can you describe their relationship or how they maybe worked together?

David Reynolds: She was a very courageous woman who went back into the South and retrieved many, many enslaved people and led them north. She actually met John Brown in Canada, because she often took enslaved people up there, and she met him in Canada. They became quite, quite friendly with each other. He admired her probably as much as he admired any individual in the nation, and he said that, "Harriet Tubman is more of a man than anybody I've ever met." He used those words. He was just trying to say that she really was a very, very courageous

human being. She supported his plans, too. There was even a chance she might have come to Harpers Ferry to help him, but she was in Canada at the time and she was ill and so forth, so she didn't make it to Harpers Ferry. There was big respect between them.

Tanya Domi: John Brown predicted, no, prophesied rather, that blood would need to be shed in order to end slavery in America. You talked about this, and it's also reported that actually during the trial and the subsequent media coverage, Henry David Thoreau, the famous essayist and poet, commented that it was not his weapons that were compelling, but, rather, his words. Can you talk about that?

David Reynolds: Well, too often, we associate John Brown with terrorism, with violence, and all of that. He did predict that, unfortunately, the crimes of this guilty land will probably be purged in blood, and turned out he was right. However, Thoreau said that his words were more powerful than his rifles because what happened is that he was held in jail for about six weeks while he was being tried and brought to trial and everything like that. During those weeks, he was interviewed freely by mainly hostile people, people that didn't like him, but he said. "I just came to free the slaves. That's all. I had no intention to become famous or anything like that. I just wanted to help the slaves and free them."

David Reynolds: He said it in such a way that these pro-slavery people would publish his words in their newspapers, and suddenly the newspapers were going around the country and even around the world, so Thoreau said at one point, "John Brown is editing every newspaper around because his words are being printed everywhere." They spread a kind of anti-slavery gospel, because here was a guy, here was a man who, as Frederick Douglass said, "I was willing to live for my race. John Brown was willing to die for my race."

David Reynolds: John Brown was actually very happy in jail. One of the words that he used, one of the phrases, was that ... He was asked if he would like to have a famous preacher, a minister administer his last rites and accompany him to the gallows where he would be executed. John Brown said, "You know what? I really would rather, be much prouder to go to the gallows with a ragged slave woman, a slave woman in rags and her children." He said, "That would make me proud to be able to go to the gallows that way rather than the most famous preacher in the land."

David Reynolds: It was those kind of words that really stirred a lot of people, which is why he became a tremendous hero to the North during the Civil War, and the favorite marching song was, "John Brown's body lies moldering in the grave, but his soul keeps marching on."

Tanya Domi: This ended up being not only was he a martyr, but John Brown's Body, the song became the text of the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

David Reynolds: Yes, yes.

Tanya Domi: It's really remarkable. I really did not know that.

David Reynolds: Yeah. What happened was that Julia Ward Howe, who was the wife of one of John Brown's supporters, was in a carriage going around Washington and she heard this stirring thing about John Brown's Body, and the chorus was, "Glory, glory hallelujah, his soul is marching on," and so forth. She went home, to the hotel, and then she woke up at 4:00 in the morning and she scribbled out the Battle Hymn of the Republic, using the exact same chorus, the Glory, glory, hallelujah and the exact same melody, but just, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." The song became transformed into the Battle Hymn of the Republic, and then she went back to sleep. Then she sent it to The Atlantic magazine and was published and it became kind of a national anthem, one of the great songs.

Tanya Domi: That's really quite a story. Of course, his existence and what he did at Harpers Ferry, now, of course, really radicalized his profile. You talk about how Lincoln had to distance himself from him when he was running for president.

David Reynolds: Yeah, because what happens, Lincoln was a Republican, and the Democrats were tarring the Republicans with John Brown. John Brown did something that was technically lawless. It was again, he was tried. He was found guilty on three counts of breaking the law, and he was hanged. Technically, he was a criminal even though he could have been a martyr. If you're running for president, you don't want to look too close to John Brown, particularly when the opposing party, the Democrats ... Back then the Democrats were the conservatives. The Republicans were the liberals.

David Reynolds: When the conservatives, the Democrats, were saying, "Oh, you guys are a bunch of John Browns," Lincoln really had to pretty carefully distance himself from John Brown, even though he said, "John Brown showed rare unselfishness at Harpers Ferry." He basically really, really admired John Brown, but publicly, he had to say, "Well ..." What he says, that John Brown was not a Republican whatsoever. There were no Republicans at Harpers Ferry. Eventually, he becomes more outwardly supportive as the Civil War goes on.

Tanya Domi: What do you think his greatest legacy is? He really actually calls out to me on some level right now, given we've had this period of several years of young black men being murdered by police in this country. I think about what would John Brown say about that? This moment, 2016 we saw Black Rights Matters come forward, the documented shootings that continue. It seems like, while we have come a long way, there's incredible residual racism, if not structural racism, still remains in America.

David Reynolds: Yeah. Well, John Brown, if he were alive today, definitely ... He said many, many times that, "I admire and value and find precious the most oppressed people in this country ..." At that time, it was enslaved people and also Native Americans. He included them as well. "... as much as I do the president, the most famous

white people." He really was a believer in human equality, human equality through the Declaration of Independence, but also according to his vision of religion. He was a quite religious man.

David Reynolds: If he were alive today, he definitely would ... I don't think that he would use violence. I think that he would try to use ... Because he was, even though he wasn't well-educated, he was quite a good speaker. His words before the Virginia Court Emerson said were second only to the Gettysburg Address among ... He said there were only two great speeches, and the top one was the Gettysburg Address.

Tanya Domi: Address.

David Reynolds: And the second one is John Brown's speech to the Virginia Court. He would somehow speak out very, very forcefully against racism, and he would be kind of appalled that people like Ted Kaczynski, who was the unbomber, and a guy named John [Hurt 00:16:52] who killed an abortion doctor and Timothy McVeigh, who was at the Oklahoma City, that they act in his spirit. That's the trouble, is that John Brown has been picked up by certain anarchistic types and who say, "Oh, well, John Brown ..."

David Reynolds: Even John Wilkes Booth, I'm writing a chapter now on John Wilkes Booth, writing a book on Lincoln, and he was at John Brown's hanging, as was Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. A lot of people at John Brown's hanging. Booth, even though he hated, hated what John Brown stood for, because John Wilkes Booth was a Southern white supremacist, so he was [inaudible 00:17:38]. But he called John Brown the grandest man of the century because he just admired his sheer moxie, his willingness to die for a principle. John Wilkes Booth, in effect, tried to be John Brown in reverse, John Brown in reverse.

Tanya Domi: Right. Flipped it.

David Reynolds: He flipped it.

Tanya Domi: Yeah.

David Reynolds: Because he really, really admired John Brown, admired his character, but he completely missed the point of John Brown. John Brown-

Tanya Domi: And perverted it.

David Reynolds: And perverted it.

Tanya Domi: Yes.

David Reynolds: Totally.

Tanya Domi: Yes. This is a century of giants. I was just reviewing bios, John Brown, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Tubman, William Webb, Frederick Douglass. These are giants. This is a century of seminal American heroes, in my view.

David Reynolds: Yeah, they are. You have Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Tanya Domi: Of course.

David Reynolds: Henry David Thoreau.

Tanya Domi: Yes.

David Reynolds: You have Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Tanya Domi: Emily Dickinson.

David Reynolds: Emily Dickinson, go on and on.

Tanya Domi: Yes.

David Reynolds: What's kind of amazing about all of this is that, and it's kind of a lesson, I think, today we need as much education as we can get, and we should do that, but we should also remind ourselves that, for example, Frederick Douglass didn't have a day of school. Abraham Lincoln, our greatest president, had less than one year of school, just little picking up log cabin schools when he was a kid now and then, but less than one year. Yet, he could recite Shakespeare by the page. He didn't do it because he wanted to brag about Shakespeare. He just did it because he felt the emotions of Shakespeare. What I'm saying is that ... And Walt Whitman didn't make it beyond age 11 in school.

David Reynolds: There is such a thing as reading, self-education, curiosity. That's what really, really ... In our day and age, yes, you need education, but to really be a great person, you always have to be educating yourself. All of these people-

Tanya Domi: And they're all a testament to the practice.

David Reynolds: Yeah, all a testament. Yeah.

Tanya Domi: That's very interesting. Not only that, but they were morally courageous. Many of them were so morally courageous.

David Reynolds: Yes.

Tanya Domi: You don't have to be literate or learned. They came from a really moral place.

David Reynolds: Yeah, absolutely. Someone like Harriet Beecher Stowe, she was just a struggling housewife and she was so stirred by the horrible Fugitive Slave Law that she just furiously wrote this novel called Uncle Tom's Cabin, and it really helped to change history. It sold millions of copies. It was read everywhere, became the most popular play in American history. It really did change people's minds in its very, very moving portrait of enslaved people.

Tanya Domi: Very interesting. It also stands out to me as a woman of the 21st century that you had two significant women, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Tubman, that were powerful figures.

David Reynolds: Yeah. Harriet Tubman, of course, is, I think, rightfully remembered nowadays as someone who was incredibly courageous. She would go down South hundreds of times, and she would retrieve enslaved people and take them with her north. Those who sometimes wanted to turn back, she would maybe raise her gun and say, "You ain't going back there. You're coming with me." But that's just the way she was. When you think of the sheer courage of people like, actually, all of these people, even Abraham Lincoln who got so many death threats. He had a little cubbyhole in his desk called Assassination because he got at least one letter every week threatening assassination.

Tanya Domi: His life.

David Reynolds: Finally, he was assassinated. But he was very courageous, too. You think of John Brown, Harriet Tubman, just incredible.

Tanya Domi: Incredible constellation.

David Reynolds: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Speaking of which, you will be delivering the keynote at the celebration of Walt Whitman's life in Brooklyn on May 31st, May 28th, rather, I'm sorry, for the 20th anniversary of his birth. As author of two books on Whitman, can you tell us why he is considered one of the most preeminent American poets of the 19th century, who is also called the bard of democracy? What's your view? He is a giant in my view too, a giant of letters, and, as you say, didn't go to school after 11 years old, became a newspaperman at 12 years old.

David Reynolds: Yeah. Well, what happened is that, and this will be part of the point of my lecture, is that, yeah, he became a newspaperman who was a Democrat at the time. But then he went beyond party because he saw his nation splitting apart over slavery. He put himself in the middle, and he really wanted to create in poetry almost a new bible, the bible of democracy, because he came to see great poetry as a means of healing people, of healing. He says in the preface to Leaves of Grass, his line, he says, "This is what you shall do. Go out in every season of your life and read these leaves of grass in the open air."

David Reynolds: If you do read them, if you do read his poetry, they awaken you to the beauty of the world around you and also the beauty of just kind of common humanity of everybody. There is literally almost no nationality that's not mentioned in his poetry. He admires African-Americans and Native Americans, and he talks about Mexican people and on and on and on, people of various nationalities. That's why he's called the bard of democracy because he puts into poetry the concept of total inclusiveness and total absorption of the world around him and kind of almost a cosmic democracy, really. He says, "I celebrate myself and what I assume you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." The idea of a shared universe, everything's really shared.

Tanya Domi: That is one of the most beautiful lines he wrote. I think of that, actually, Song of Myself in Leaves of Grass, as really the American Homer's Odyssey.

David Reynolds: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: It's really, truly. It seems to me that it's quintessentially American, "I celebrate myself. I sing myself." Americans are very much about individuality, and I think that Whitman really captures it in this incredible piece of work.

David Reynolds: Yeah, and he said that the big issue in American life is the individual on the one hand and the mass, what he called en masse, and what he also called the centripetal, meaning the, again, the individual and the centrifugal, the centrifugal spreading outward, centripetal spreading toward oneself. He said that no nation in the world except America allows for such great individual expression. The same time, no nation allows for such sense of equality and democracy as America.

David Reynolds: He says that it's very important that we keep both of these things in mind, and he even applied this to politics. He said, "States' rights must be preserved and admired, but at the same time, the union and the central government should be kept in place as well." He was always looking for a kind of balance between the centripetal, the individual, and the mass. That's why he says in his poetry, "I am one of the centripetal and centrifugal gang." He actually uses those words.

Tanya Domi: In America, which is his poem America, is one of my favorite Whitman poems, even if it's very short, really. He starts with this, and I found it pretty shocking, "Center of equal daughters, equal sons." He begins with daughters and not sons, "All alike, endeared, grown, ungrown, young, or old." It's very democratic where he puts women first in a century when women certainly were not.

David Reynolds: Yeah. Women didn't get the vote until many years later, till 1920. They were trying to get the vote at that time, but they didn't succeed. Yeah, in his poetry, he puts women just exactly on the same equal plane as men. He says, "Women are as great as men are," and he meant that. He even in one poem envisages a woman who's quite athletic. She can shoot and hunt and row and run and

everything like that. Yeah, he was extremely liberated in his view of women, quite far ahead of his time.

Tanya Domi: He was also, I think, a man who wrote about the body and being central, and he wrote about sex and visualizing his lovers. That was very unusual for that time.

David Reynolds: Yeah. He was a believer in physiology. He said, "Welcome is every organ and attribute of me and every part of my body is hearty and clean." He said in another line, "Copulation is no more rank," meaning dirty, "no more rank to me than death is." He sees the body and sexuality as part of life, a natural part of life and not something to be kind of hidden away and-

Tanya Domi: Or to be ashamed of.

David Reynolds: Or to be ashamed of. Yeah, absolutely. He's a poet of candor and naturalness. Unfortunately, I think that's one reason, however, why at the very beginning, he was generally rejected by his contemporaries, because he expected his poetry to sell very well. It got some marvelous reviews [inaudible 00:29:28] but he recalled, "I could just barely give away the first thousand copies" that he printed in 1855. Nowadays, each of those copies would be about \$300,000, but back then ...

Tanya Domi: Of course.

David Reynolds: Yeah, of course. Back then, it was a little too frank, a little too open.

Tanya Domi: It was too edgy, too edgy.

David Reynolds: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Tanya Domi: He grew up in Brooklyn, but then the Civil War came. His poetry is very powerful. One of my favorite poems of all time is Whitman's O Captain! My Captain! My fearful trip is done. Having served in the military myself, there's something I really deeply connect with in Whitman. How did the Civil War years shape Whitman? He was a nurse to those in the field and witnessed probably horrible wounds, especially these grotesque battlefield amputations, which are really one of the noteworthy aspects of the war, with the sulfuric ether and chloroform was used for anesthesia on battlefield hospitalizations. You think about 620,000 dead, just incredible. I can't imagine being a nurse in that context.

David Reynolds: Actually, this is what made him famous in his own day, is The Good Gray Poet because he went down from Brooklyn to Washington in 1862 because his brother George, who was actually in many Civil War battles, had been wounded at Fredericksburg. It turns out it was not a serious wound, but Whitman stayed on there in Washington and he saw over 100,000 wounded soldiers and quite a number of them died and had horrible gangrene and infections and

amputations. He wrote a very powerful poem called The Wound-Dresser, Wound-Dresser about-

Tanya Domi: Right. Yes.

David Reynolds: About going from bed to bed. It's a very realistic poem. It's kind of difficult to read because he talks about the gore that he has to put into the pails, the buckets. He writes another poem about the pile of limbs. Legs and arms and everything is in each pile outside of the hospital tent. He saw a lot of pretty traumatic sights in the hospital. Yet, in a way, that took a certain courage and a certain heroism so that when people heard about this, they said, "My goodness, he was something of a selfless hero." He did work, kind of had a part-time job at the government, the Indian Affairs Office, but he did this for free. This was all volunteer-

Tanya Domi: He just gave of himself.

David Reynolds: Volunteer work. He would read The Bible of Poetry to the dying people and give them candy and so forth and try to comfort them. He was rediscovered, "Oh, my god, this guy's a real patriot," someone who really gave of himself during the war.

Tanya Domi: He not only was a nurse, but he ... Just the witnessing. I guess that's one of the reasons why he was considered a hero, his reporting of it through his poetry. The amputation survival rate was about 23%, pretty horrible. A lot of people may not know this, but it wasn't until the Vietnam War the dead that surpassed, finally surpassed the total dead in the Civil War.

David Reynolds: Exactly.

Tanya Domi: It's really remarkable.

David Reynolds: It's amazing. The number recently has gone up from 620 to 750, 750,000 in terms of the recent estimate of-

Tanya Domi: Afghanistan and Iraq War.

David Reynolds: Of, well, 750 during the Civil War.

Tanya Domi: Right.

David Reynolds: Yeah, yeah.

Tanya Domi: Oh, oh, excuse me.

David Reynolds: During the Civil War.

Tanya Domi: Oh.

David Reynolds: Yeah, 750.

Tanya Domi: It was 750.

David Reynolds: 750, yeah.

Tanya Domi: It went up.

David Reynolds: Yeah, it went up. Yeah, it was a real bloodbath, to be sure. As you mentioned, the medications back then were quite primitive. It was before the idea of germ theory, so they didn't know how to use really clean instruments and all of that and they just didn't have a sense of how to manage infections and gangrene and all of that. It was pretty bad. Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. It's probably the worst war in American history, when you think about how it's carried out, and on American soil.

David Reynolds: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: He never really comes back to Brooklyn. Talk about his life, about after the war.

David Reynolds: Well, after the war, he does live on in Washington. Then he does actually move back to Brooklyn for a while, but then in the early 1870s, he gets the first of several strokes. It's at that point that he actually moves down to Camden, New Jersey, which was like at that time, an up and coming young city, because his brother George lives down there and he wants to be near George. He basically spends the rest of his life down there. He does travel a little bit. He goes to Canada. He goes as far west as Colorado, and also he continues to write poetry and he writes a lot of prose.

David Reynolds: He spends a lot of his life looking back at Lincoln and the Civil War. His bread-and-butter speech was The Death of Abraham Lincoln because his friend Peter Doyle had been in Ford's Theater when Lincoln was shot, and so he had a firsthand look at what happened that evening, and so Lincoln, was often asked to give his lecture about the death of Abraham Lincoln and also to recite O Captain! My Captain! which is a marvelous poem, as you mentioned. Although it's kind of like one of your old songs on your iPod, after a while he got so tired of it that he said, "Damn my captain."

Tanya Domi: Fair enough. Fair enough.

David Reynolds: Yeah, fair enough.

Tanya Domi: Fair enough.

David Reynolds: It's a wonderful poem, but he got a little ... Everywhere he went, he had to recite it.

Tanya Domi: Well, not very many people recite it now.

David Reynolds: No, no.

Tanya Domi: You sort of look at it and think about how many captains led the ship and died with it.

David Reynolds: Right.

Tanya Domi: It's sort of symbolic, I think, in many ways.

David Reynolds: Yeah, it is.

Tanya Domi: Song of Myself, you're going to go to Brooklyn and you're going to deliver this keynote. What do you think about one of the most ... Besides that he's the bard of democracy, what is it about him that continues to animate us? Here we are, we're sitting in New York City in this radio studio for KNETV and we're talking about this figure from the 19th century, and yet he still fascinates all of us.

David Reynolds: Yeah. I think one thing is his poetry is so lyrical and also both very relaxed and very rhythmic. It doesn't rhyme, most of his poetry doesn't rhyme, it doesn't follow a certain metrical pattern. The lines are of different length. He really liberates poetry from the restrictions of strict-

Tanya Domi: He makes it accessible.

David Reynolds: He makes it accessible, and it includes so many scenes from, for example, city life and rural life and people of different races and different ethnicities. It's such an expansive poetry. Also, for me, I think if you read it, it can kind of lift your mood. Whitman was once sitting there and he had had several strokes. He couldn't move very well toward the end of his life. He was sitting his chair. But he said, "You know what? I stand for the cheerful conclusions." He said, "I stand for the cheerful ..."

David Reynolds: This was at a time when, frankly, physically he was going really downhill. If you read his poetry, it kind of opens you up to what I call the miracle of the commonplace. Toward the beginning of Song of Myself, he says, "I lean and loaf at my ease looking at a spear of summer grass." Just admiring the sheer beauty of the grass, just a single spear of grass. He goes so far as to say ... I don't know if I would go this far, but he says, "A mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."

Tanya Domi: Quite illustrative.

- David Reynolds: Yeah, very. He says at one point, "My armpit odor is finer than any prayer or creed or Bible." In other words, kind of worshiping the material world, but in a very kind of very, very earthy way. I think that if you read him and then walk outdoors in a summer day, it just makes you appreciate just everyday life.
- Tanya Domi: Well, he was a walker, like all of us New Yorkers are, and I think that the poem about the Brooklyn Ferry is one of the great pieces where he describes being on the ferry and it's like you're transported to the ferry. He just fills it with so much, fills it with so much illustration that you feel like you're there on the ship, on the ferry.
- David Reynolds: He describes the circling gulls above and then he describes the distant ships and distant buildings of Brooklyn and New York, and he describes the glittering sunlight on the water of the East River. He used to ferry back and forth between Brooklyn and New York a lot. And he describes the what we would call commuters, the people on the boat. He even talks to us because he says, "You who are reading this 50 years hence, 100 years hence, I am with you too. I am on the boat with you as well. I'm on the ferry." It becomes a symbol of the way he just speaks for all generations. He reaches right through time.
- Tanya Domi: Well, Whitman not only celebrates himself. He celebrates humanity and this is where we can all embrace him again on his 200th birthday. I want to thank you for being here today, David Reynolds.
- David Reynolds: Thank you very much.
- Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project and thanks to today's guest, Distinguished Professor David Reynolds of the Graduate Center, CUNY.
- Tanya Domi: The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.