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“The Spectres in Books”: The Formatting of Walt Whitman’s 1855 “Song of Myself” against the *Norton Anthology*

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As a poet’s work becomes established, its legacy often assumes different shapes on its journey. Whether these be changes implemented by the poet or by some external source for reasons unknown, a final product rarely mirrors an original publication. The Fifth Edition of the Norton Anthology of Poetry situates Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” in a context that is in some ways more generic than the 1855 original and in others more specific. This difference in presentation, coupled with the inclusion of later edits made by Whitman in 1881 and 1892, represents the evolutionary nature of Whitman’s project, but does so at the loss of the autochthonous roots and embodiment of the incipient American identity so powerfully encapsulated in the first version of “Song of Myself.”

To best address the discrepancies between the two representations, I will begin with a comparison of the actual books as physical entities and progress to the more minute edits of text and punctuation. Whitman’s 1855 publication of *Leaves of Grass* is constructed as an artistic work that underscores the core theme of the construction of a new identity, the “national Literature” called for by Whitman in the preface (Whitman 5). The book was typeset in part by Whitman himself. The cover of the book, green leather with embossed floral motifs, evokes the typical symbology of the American myth of autochthony.¹ (See inset photo at right.) The juncture

¹ The autochthonous ideal is that of nativity and growing naturally from one’s surroundings. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared during the end of the Creole moment in American history. The current generation was no longer composed of European colonists nor of their successors who still retained European blood through marriage; they were wholly American. At this time the yoke of European colonialism was drifting into the background of the national memory and poets, writers, and artists of all trades were struggling with the problem of how to construct a genuine and individual reality out of this incipient American identity. This main characteristics of this movement include a focus on the wilderness and nature, a focus on the working man and do-it-yourself construction, and freedom for organic growth and natural development.
between artistry and representation of nature is best seen, however, in the detail of the typography of the title.

Embossed and set in gold leaf, the letters themselves are formed to be extensions of nature, sending branches upward, roots downward, and sprouting leaves and flowers. The word “of” in the title is only faintly recognizable, as it has been rendered into twigs, shoots, roots, and logs. Before even opening the book, the reader is already inducted into a literary world where organic growth and written constructions become one and the same.

The *Norton Anthology* serves as a stark contrast. A product of modern technology and construction in its paperback form, it is glue-bound and printed on a paper quality not far off from newsprint. The artistry of the cover embodies a sleek modern graphic design aesthetic: it employs grid systems (a phenomenon that did not evolve until the Bauhaus innovations of the early 1900s in Europe), stock imagery, and prominently displays the names of the editors, the edition, and the title, “The *Norton Anthology of Poetry*.” The prominence of the editors, edition, and the sheer fact that the book exists primarily as an anthology connotes a mode that is both pedagogic and corporate. This is only enforced by the immense density of the book (2,182 pages not including preface of copyright information). This brings to light one of the first paradoxes of comparison between these two works. Whitman’s work exists purely for his poems—there is no author given, no alleged purpose for the poems other than the purposes of poetry expressed in the introduction. Conversely, the *Norton Anthology* primarily exists as an educational reference.
work and makes no pretenses to be anything else at face value. Despite this discrepancy that may cause the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* to seem more whimsical, Whitman’s original contains a seed of gravity and care in its handset type and hewn leather that is lost in the flippancy and erasure of individuality displayed in the Norton that are easily reproducible en masse.

Moving inward, we can now begin to examine the sizing and page layout as it relates to the presentation of “Song of Myself.” Whitman’s poetry was novel in that he was truly one of the first American poets to truly create a free verse project of such magnitude. His poetry threw off the traditional closed forms and meters, many of which had their roots in European artistic identity and were at odds with the nascent American conscience. The length of the lines ebbs and flows as Whitman sees fit, at times as short as “It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk” (1885 Whitman 1326), and at others as expansive as “Broad muscular fields, branches of liveoak, loving lounger in my winding paths, it shall be you” (543). In order to accommodate this extension of lines beyond any set metrical limit, the dimensions of Whitman’s 1855 *Leaves of Grass* are larger than normal, measuring in at a width of approximately six and a half inches. The extra spacing allowed for the various line lengths to flow naturally and created a presentation in which the reader could receive a deeper impression of the variegation among line lengths and the true freedom of the verse form. This is not the case for the Norton Anthology; It is not designed to adhere to any one poet’s particular aesthetic or to highlight any movement’s distinct characteristics. To enlarge the dimensions of a paperback book with such a large page count would become (even more) cumbersome as well. Thus, Whitman’s poetry appears cramped and often flows into indented lines, stretching and cramping the verse paragraphs and largely curtailing the organic construction of the variance of the line lengths. An argument could be made
that this strongly undermines the project of “Song of Myself” as well as all of Whitman’s free verse creations: The poems are caged in a corporately predetermined framework, divesting them of the ability to readily exhibit the defining characteristic that was so integral to the autochthonous project of constructed identity.

The context in which “Song of Myself” appears in each publication is also extremely important. To begin with, no author is explicitly stated in written form in Whitman’s first publication of *Leaves of Grass*. Rather than a byline, authorship is expressed in the lefthand page of the frontispiece, from which an etching of Whitman, dressed in common working clothes, wearing his hat, and poised in a casual yet challenging stance, gazes out at the reader. Not only was the author’s identity nebulous, but also the poems themselves flowed into one another without strict and set divisions. In the 1855 original, “Song of Myself” had no title. The poem appeared simply as the first poem in *Leaves of Grass*, and all that separated it from the collection’s other poems were simple page breaks. This lack of sectional differentiation again emphasizes the organic, free-flowing, and holistic nature of Whitman’s project as it relates to the autochthonous ideal. The lack of titles and authorship also contributes to another characteristic of Whitman’s poetry in *Leaves of Grass*: the attempted embodiment of all variations of the American identity while leaving intentional space for those not mentioned to project themselves onto the poetry and identify with a greater identity. The only context truly given for the poems is Whitman’s introduction, which calls for the aforementioned “national literature” and emphasizes the power and importance of the poet in sculpting this new identity.

By the very fact of its nature as a pedagogical anthology, the Norton Anthology must utilize a certain taxonomy for the purposes of clarification. Upon opening to the entry for “Song
of Myself,” the reader is immediately faced first with the author’s name in full capital print and the years of his life. Before the poetry can even be examined, it is situated within a particular era and with a certain individual. These connotations, though, are neither explained by the author nor by the Norton Anthology’s ever-present footnotes. It relies purely upon the reader’s knowledge of the era (or lack thereof). In yet another paradox, it both specifically connects the reader to the era while separating the reader from the specific viewpoints originally presented by the author that define how he perceived the time period. The immediate tie to the author is also quite problematic, as it subverts Whitman’s goal of speaking for a larger body, of speaking with a universal “I.” The poem itself is now titled as well— an innovation that disturbs the organic flow when situated within Leaves of Grass, but whose gravity is lost when floating with a few similar poems in a context of thousands of poems whose individuality is defined only through a system of nomenclature.

Upon reading the poem, the reader finds the first instance in which the comparison between presentations becomes more complex, as the assertion can no longer be made that the changes are solely at the hands of the editors of the Norton Anthology. “Song of Myself,” as well as all of the poems encompassed within Leaves of Grass, underwent a great deal of revisions. The fifth edition of the Norton Anthology chooses to use selections based on the 1855 and 1881 editions, although a footnote does specify that the version is ultimately “based on Whitman’s 1891-92 text,” or deathbed edition (Norton 1060). The choice to incorporate the later revisions has great bearing upon the reading of the poem. While it does allow for a reader to notice the evolutionary quality of Whitman’s work through his constant redaction, the power and substance that take root so strongly in the 1855 version are often eclipsed. In a later edition, Whitman
assigned numbers to various sections of “Song of Myself,” fifty-two sections in all. The Norton Anthology chose to use these section markers to define the parts of the poem that suited the pedagogical project. The first and last sections of the poem are given in order to create a bracketed sense of completion, while the other sections represent the more seminal elements of “Song of Myself”: In section six, the explanation of the metaphor of leaves of grass; in section eleven, an example of an erotic scene that contributed to Whitman’s avant-garde nature; and in section thirteen, the dialogue between the universal American “I” and the universal American “you” to form a simultaneous bridge of identity that transcends duality.2

By appearing outside of the context of Leaves of Grass, another important interplay is lost. In the original 1855 publication, the only technical mark of authorship occurs in the copyright, in which the book is registered specifically to Walter Whitman. Within the poetry, however, Whitman refers to himself as “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos / Disorderly fleshy sensual….eating drinking and breeding” (Whitman 499-500). The distinction between “Walter Whitman” and “Walt Whitman” is important, as “Walt” occurs only within the framework of the poetry and embodies a working-class typology who is in tune with his body and represents, in part, the chaos of nature present within the human. This is a strikingly different character when compared with the “Walter Whitman” associated with the urban copyright location of Brooklyn. The construction of this identity speaks greatly to the purposeful sculpting of the poetry with the autochthonous, natural identity to create the new breed of national literature. Without the context of the copyright information, however, the distinction cannot be made and a very marked analytical detail is lost.

2 Analysis of the use of “I” in “Song of Myself” and its possible roles as a creator of identities or as an imperialistic poetic project, while fascinating, are beyond the scope of this paper.
Entering now into the most detailed comparison, spelling and punctuation become key. There are multiple instances in which text has been added, spellings changed, punctuational conventions altered, and format shifted. In the seven sections of “Song of Myself” presented in the Norton Anthology, there are relatively few additions. The most sizable is the addition of two verse paragraphs at the end of section one that elaborate on the introductory topic of being grounded in American roots: “My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air, / born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same” (Norton 6-13). The other notable addition, it should be said, is that of the words “and sing myself” appended onto the poem’s first line. This seems to be in direct concordance with the titling of the poem, “Song of Myself,” in order to better solidify the title to the thematic structure of the poem.

I find the alterations in punctuation, however, to be the most striking. One of the main features in the original 1855 “Song of Myself” is the lack of commas in enumerative sentences in lines such as “Mix’d tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you” (537) and “Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised” (516). In the Norton presentation, these have been altered to “Mix’d tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you!” (536) and “Of the deform’d, trivial, flat, foolish, despised” (514). The insertion of commas destroys the building, rushing tone that characterizes the enumerative quality of “Song of Myself” and the gloriously overwhelming descriptions and options that embody the American identity. When these enumerations are not enough, however, the 1855 edition employs a different punctuation convention that is lost in later editions presented in the Norton.

3 Before beginning, I find it important to stress that the changes in punctuation and spelling were not made by the Norton Anthology, but rather by Whitman himself in later editions. The Norton Anthology does exhibit agency, however, in choosing to portray the later edited versions of “Song of Myself.”
One of the most unique punctuational characteristics of “Song of Myself,” and most of Whitman’s writing and poetry in *Leaves of Grass* for that matter, is the mid-sentence use of ellipses. In the poetry, the ellipses creates a space for the reader to insert him or herself into the poem, to either interact with Whitman or to add their specific identity characteristics to the multitudes that he contains. For example, in line 73 of the 1855 edition, Whitman writes, “Loaf with me on the grass... loose the stop from your throat.” This ellipses creates a visual and mental space in which the reader can accept Whitman’s invitation and figuratively enter into the poetry with him, making the poetry that continues all the more meaningful. In enumerations of details such as “Disorderly fleshy sensual... eating drinking and breeding” (Whitman 500), the ellipses between adjectives allows a space for the reader to insert his or her own ideas of how the speaker should be personified or how the “I” of the poem should function. This form of enumerative ellipses is especially pivotal in parts of “Song of Myself” that were omitted from the Norton Anthology, in which Whitman describes a multitude of American typologies. His use of the ellipses is a way to acknowledge the inability for a totally encompassing list, however, and offers a method for rectification so that the reader can still fashion him or herself into the American identity: “A farmer, mechanic, or artist... a gentleman, sailor, lover or quaker” (Whitman 345).

The editorial choice of using a later edition that replaces the ellipses with commas conveys a wholly different tone: While still allowing for pause, commas do not invite insertion in the same manner as the original ellipses.

More startling then the shift to commas, however, is the insertion of the period at the very end of the poem. The original poem ends with the sentence “I stop some where waiting for you” with no final stop (Whitman 1336). In the Norton version, however the poem ends “I stop
somewhere waiting for you.” with a final stop (Norton 1346). Having so skillfully employed punctuation to add new layers of depth to “Song of Myself” throughout the poem, it is hard to believe that the final period was omitted without reason. Through it’s absence, the poem is opened into the future, opened to the connection with a reader from anytime who may read Whitman’s words and find him- or herself reconstructing themselves as a part of the American identity, which is in itself an ever-evolving entity. The utilization of that final period in the Norton Anthology implies a termination point, connoting antiquity for Whitman’s poem and stagnation for the American persona.

Through this inward-moving comparison of presentations of “Song of Myself,” it becomes strikingly clear that a great deal of the poem’s impact is strongly founded in the details of the original presentation. While “Song of Myself” remains one of the most defining poems of American literature regardless of its presentation, features ranging from the smallest punctuation marks to the broadest methods of bookbinding all contribute to a truly conclusive and comprehensive historical analysis. We are reminded that a book is not only made up of the words on its pages, but is a compilation of many parts, some of which are physically tangible and some of which operate on the highest abstract planes. If separated, a part of the meaning will always be lost. When contemplating which presentation may be in some way more official or more correct, the best choice is to ask Whitman himself, for he would surely recommend searching to the source: “You shall no longer take things at second or third hand… nor feed on the spectres in books.”
WALT WHITMAN
1819–1892

From Song of Myself

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abuse itself to you,
And you must not abuse it to the other.

Loose me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the beat.
Only the full I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head atwrest my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all argument of the earth,
And know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers and the women
my sisters and lovers,

And that a thousand thousandctl the creation is love.

A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands,
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green
stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff? I give them the same, I receive them the same.
And now it seems to me the beautiful mane hair of groves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be it had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out
of their mothers' laps.

And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darkest than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for
nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and
women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken
soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere;
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the
end to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckless.

290 Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
Twenty-eight young men, and all so friendly,
Twenty-eight years of womanly life, and all so lonesome.
She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
She hides handsome and richly drest all the blinds of the window
Which of the young men does she like the best?
Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

Where are you off to, lady? For I see you,
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.
Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth
bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.

The hands of the young men glister'd with wet, it ran from their
long hair,
Little streamers pass'd all over their bodies.

An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,
It descend'd tremblingly from their temples and ribs.
The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the
sun, they do not ask who seizes last to them,
They do not know who pulls and declines with pendant and bending
arch,
They do not think whom they squeeze with spray.

The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses, the block swags
underneath on its tied-over chain,
The negro that drives the long draw of the stone-yard, steady and tall
he stands poised on one leg on the stringpiece;
His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens over
his hip-bands,
His glance is calm and commanding, he tosses the slouch of his hat
away from his forehead,
The sun falls on his creepy hair and mustache, falls on the black of
his polished and perfect limbs.

I behold the picturesque giant and love him, and I do not stop there,
I go with the team also.
In me the careess of life wherever moving, backward as well as
forward slung,
To inches aside and junior bending, not a person or object
missing,
Absorbing all to myself and for this song.

Ow! that rattle the yoke and chain or halt in the seafy shade, what
is that you express in your eyes?
It seems to me more than all the print I have read in my life.
My tread scare the wood-drake and wood-duck on my distant and
day-long ramble,
They rise together, they slowly circle around,
I believe in these wing'd purposes,
And acknowledge red, yellow, white, playing within me,
And consider green and violet and the tufted crown intensional,
And do not call the tortoise unworthy because she is not something
else,
And the lay in the woods never studied the ganus, yet
musical scale
truly pretty well to me,
And the look of the lay more sorrow, silliness out of me.

1 From 'Blaeu, bishop under the moon' in 'Sword and Song', in some uncertainty.
Walt Whitman, a Requiem, of Manhattan the song.
Fertile, flesh, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
No sentimental, no tender above men and women or apart from
them...

No more modest than immodest.
Unscrew the locks from the doors!
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!
Whoever degrades another degrades me...
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.

Through me the afflatus singing and surging through
me the current and index.
I speak the password primeval, I give the sign of democracy;
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their
counterpart of on the same terms.

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of poisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseased and despairing and of thieves and mobs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the
father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices wild and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.

I do not press my fingers across my mouth,
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and body.
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is
a miracle.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or my
touch'd from.

The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.

If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of
my own body, or any part of it,
Translucent mould of me it shall be you!
Shaded ledges and rests it shall be you.
I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawn over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow’d wilds,
It causes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in loco jags.

I hoist to myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love.
140
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless.
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry

1
Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose.

And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

2
The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day,
The simple, compact, well-join’d scheme, myself disintegrat’d, may be
one disintegrat’d yet part of the scheme,
The similitudes of the past and those of the future,
The glories string like beads on my smallest sights and hearings as
the wall in the street and the passage over the river.

The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away,
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them.
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore.
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide.
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east.
Others will see the islands large and small.
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high.
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them.
Will enjoy the sunset, the pearing-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of the ebbe-tide.

3
It seems not, time nor place—distance awails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence.
First as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt.
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd.
Just as you are refreshed by the gladness of the river and the brightening flow, I was refreshed.
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried.
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick arm’d pipes of steamboats, I looked.

How many and many a time cross’d the river of old,
Watched the Twelfth-month’s sea-gulls, saw them high in December
the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
and how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow.
Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward the south.
Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water.
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
look’d at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the skirf water.
Could on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,
Could on the vapor as it flow’d in flags tinged with violet,
Look’d toward the lower-bay to notice the vessels arriving.
Saw their approach, saw about those that were near me.
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, saw the ships at anchor.

The labor at work in the rigging or our outside the spars.
The moral masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender supporting members.
The hum and humbleness in motion, the pilots in their pilot houses.

The silence that’s left by the passage, the quick tremolado which of the