Whitman’s America and “Song of Myself”

The Democratic Poet, first American poet, American bard of liberation. Each epithet has been applied, debated, and often recited as facts about Walt Whitman and his “leaves.” America has been in a relationship with Walt since 1855 when the self-appointed national poet actively sought to create poetry that would define America. His poetry labors to gather and recreate a multi-cultural, varied, and often conflicted nation into a unified whole. To him America is, “One of the great nations, the nation of many nations—the smallest the same and the largest the same” (Whitman 11). Whitman’s poems are rooted in the desire to heal, reunite, and mediate between different American factions; they encompass difference and seek to make explicit a universal nationalism or what Pease names a “common self,” the “motives all of us [the American masses] share” (Pease 115, 119). Through the use of Democratic cataloging stanza’s and the incorporation of American idioms, slang, and language that seeks to encompass all races, genders, and cultures, Whitman images what he perceives as the “imagined community” of America and pinpoints “common things” that dissolve the “boundaries of section, class and race... by affirmation of the cross-fertilization of its [American] various cultural arenas” (Anderson 6, Reynolds 309). Furthermore, he situates and legitimizes his role as community speaker within that “imagined community” by embedding himself into the text, stating, “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.” (16).

Yet the “common things” and “common self” that Whitman represents as the glue and basis for national nationalism were not widely viewed, by his 1855 audience, as either the glue or the basis for American nationalism. The 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass is solidly set against a turbulent backdrop of North and South, secession and union, and the debate between whether it should be the “United States” or the “States United” (Wynn). Whitman’s poetry cannot be viewed as a celebration of widely recognized nationalism; rather it is a pioneering argument for nationalism layered over Whitman’s belief in the absolute need for the states to remain united. By celebrating “common things” and identifying a “common self” Leaves of Grass seeks to transcend the turbulent politics of pre-Civil War America and focus the reader on how each individual citizen must be understood as part of the larger, cultural, American whole and how, reflexively, that whole depends on each, individual citizen.
Nowhere is Whitman's prowess to successfully image American nationality more visible than in the 1855 edition of "Song of Myself." The poem images Americans shared history of labor, shared culture of "audience performer interaction," and shared "dissolving of boundaries between different occupational categories" such as "actors, musicians, lecturers, scientists, popular preachers, showmen, photographers, and painters" (Reynolds 308). Additionally, the free verse form, a blended and liquefied whole made up of highly individualistic parts that mock the ability to determine what is prose or poetry, structurally mimics the argument for a unified country that depends on diversity and individuality. The use of free verse, cataloging stanzas, and specific American language throughout "Song of Myself" creates "what he [Whitman] called 'race'- a distinctive form of national expression" (Reynolds 319). This "race" is not based on color or heritage but on the unique shared attributes of the American experience.

This paper examines the 1855 edition of "Song of Myself" as an example of Whitman's argument for an American nationalism founded on unity through diversity. The poem exhibits Whitman's inventive abilities to craft something new: a non-political argument for the continuation of the Union through images, American language, and the performance of a dialogic argument.

Dialogic Argument- Poetic Prophet Location and Old World Authority:

Whitman's 1855 entrance into the negotiation of what is, or should be, American is part of the larger ongoing geo-political negotiations about America. American nationalist development cannot be considered without first acknowledging wider colonial interrelations with Western Europe. As much as Whitman’s work must be considered within its immediate historical context, it must also be considered in relation to its compliance or resistance to various genre(s), histories, and ideologies; genre(s), histories, and ideologies that originate in Western Europe and the colonization of the Americas. Whitman both complies with and resists European literary traditions. This resistance and compliance allows him to carve space to exist within, but also to transform, American literature. Prior to Whitman, American literature had remained, for the most part, analogous with European models.

Whitman draws on the Western European tradition of poetic power by locating himself within the British Romantic ideology of the poet prophet. Wordsworth declares that the poet is
"an upholder and preserver," "the rock of defense of human nature" (271). Shelley famously insists that poets "are the unrecognized legislators of the world" (850). Similarly, Whitman declares:

I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me?
I follow you whoever you are from the present hour;
My words itch at your ears till you understand them.

I do not say these things for a dollar, or to fill up the time while I wait for a boat;
It is you talking just as much as myself... I act as the tongue of you,
It was tied in your mouth... in mine it begins to be loosened. (Whitman 39)

Saying, “I act as the tongue of you,/ it was tied in your mouth... in mine it begins to be loosened” draws from Emerson who declares that the poet is the “man who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart”(551). By both “teach[ing]” and saying what is already known Whitman adheres to the conventions of the poet prophet.

Whitman’s self-location within this Romantic genre, however, is a transformation of European ideology into something distinctly American. “Song of Myself” projects a very different image of the poet prophet. Rather than developing the poet prophet reader relationship in the conventional way of prophet and follower or student and teacher, Whitman develops a conversational relationship that brings his reader into the poem and places the speaker and hearer on equal footing. “Song of Myself” begins by inviting the reader to join the speaker, “I celebrate myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”, and then moves to question the reader “Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth much?/ Have you practiced so long to learn to read? Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?” (Whitman 1). Thus the reader is immediately involved in an implicit dialogue with the speaker, and occupies a position both separate and one with the speaker. The reader is assumed to ask the same questions as the speaker, to share his “atom[s]” with the speaker, to, in fact, be the speaker. Yet the questions also allow him to be separate and envision the many different answers a reader, or
listener, might have. This convoluted reader-self is just one of the many feedback loops that Whitman imposes on his reader. Specifically, in the passage about the grass, a child is placed in the reader's position and demonstrates how the reader can simultaneously occupy the location of the individual, with its many positions, and the whole, with its united answer:

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 than he.

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 the grass is itself a child . . . . the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones 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 uncut hair of graves. ("Song of Myself" 4)
Whitman performs the separateness or unique qualities of a reader by imagining the many possible answers to the question. The grass is first a "flag", then a "handkerchief", a "scented gift", a "child", and a "uniform hieroglyphic". Yet, after imagining all of these possibilities Whitman gives us a final answer, "it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves." While all of the answers are viable, the passage walks the reader through the assessments only to finally settle on the last, with the following stanzas commenting on what heads the "hair" may be
It is through this rhetorical turn, when the reader imagines “offspring taken soon out of their mothers’ laps,” that Whitman absorbs the reader back into his voice and beliefs. Rather than treat each argument, each plausible opinion of the grass as true, the speaker settles on one answer and the reader is expected to settle on that answer as well, to share in his “atom[s]” (1). Thus Whitman is still the poet prophet, speaking for the many, the “unrecognized legislator of the world” since it is his assessment that the reader is required to accept (Shelley 850). Yet the inclusion of many other assessments is unique. Whitman reflects his argument for national unity with national diversity through this inclusion. While there are many opinions, in the end they converge into a simple whole, the “uncut hair of graves” (“Song of Myself” 4).

It is, therefore, clear that Whitman is choosing to transform the location of the poet prophet into something new, something more democratic, something uniquely American. He simultaneously asks his reader to act out a dialogue with him that imagines many different answers converging into a whole and to also occupy the individual position of reader and hearer while converging into the speaker. The grass passage asks the reader to question who or what position he occupies- is he the hearer of the speaker’s story, the child who is asking the question, the individual answers to the question, or is he the speaker? He is, in actuality, all of those things. America is both the individual and the united whole; Whitman’s reader is both his own separate entity and part of all the other individual roles that make up Americans. The poet prophet location allows Whitman to acquire the authority to define America but his transformation of that location into a dialogue makes it uniquely American, democratic, and a metaphoric performance of his argument for nationalism.

Cataloging Stanzas- Free Verse, Parataxis, and Americanisms:

The transformation of the poet prophet location into a dialogic argument is not the only way that Whitman seeks to image nationalistic unity out of chaotic diversity. Repeated use of cataloging stanzas exploit the abilities of free verse to respond to Emerson’s call to view “the poorest experience is [as] rich enough for all the purposes of expressing thought” and to “embrace words and images excluded from polite conversation” (555). This exploitation is more than utilizing romantic conventions to transform the ordinary into the divine; it is part of the
larger argument for a unified country. By organizing verse and naming patterns Whitman creates a unified whole out of very diverse individuals.

In sections 39-42 Whitman creates a complex argument that mimics, in minute and "cataloging" form, the overall argument of "Song of Myself." The section can be divided into three parts of an argument: the naming section, the combining section, and the conclusion. The first section is a naming section where Whitman chooses to "name" and image a large number of individual Americans from, "the pure contralto," to "the carpenter," to "the Wolverine," to "the fare-collector," to, finally, "the masons." Starting with "seasons pursuing each other," then moving to common activities in multiple geographies, then to family, and finally, to the "sleep" that is shared between the living and the dead the second section combines the many different individuals into unified wholes through "common things" (Whitman 10, Reynolds 308). Finally, Whitman concludes by incorporating all of the parts into himself, into his location as the poet prophet and, thereby, speaking as and for every American individual, including the reader.

The first section, starting with "the pure contralto" and ending with "the indescribable crowd," serves as the main portion of the catalogue and images many diverse individuals. Almost every line is a separate image of a specific act, a specific location, and a specific type of person or persons. Each line highlights the very uniqueness of the situation, the individual lived experience of that particular person. Like pictures being held up, the reader is invited to see "the floorman... laying the floor," "the lunatic... carried to the asylum," and "the squaw wrapt in her yellow-hemmed cloth." Some lines are longer, others shorter, they are not confined to a given metrical line or rhyming scheme and, therefore, seem as unique as the image they represent. To further mark the individuality of each image, Whitman uses vernacular, idioms, specific geography, and naming devices. Hollis observes that a "native language" was important to Whitman and he took great pains to jot down different examples of slang and American phrasing (419). The use of "the Wolverine" demonstrates this. First used in 1835 to describe the "naturalized Michigan" (Wolverene), Whitman emphasizes his use of this vernacular definition by coupling it with a specific geographical place, "the Huron" (Whitman 9). Other words such as "Woollypates," a Whitmanism for slaves; "the darkey," first used in 1840 to pejoratively describe a black man, especially one from the south (Darky); and even "half-breed," which was
coined in the late 1700's to describe those of mixed race (Half-Breed), find their way into the
catalogue, serving as specific Americanisms which create unique "spots of time."

Taken individually, each line does not seem to transition into the other. Like the
questions from the "grass" section each line is able to stand on its own, offering an individual's
viewpoint. Yet, also like the questions from the "grass" section, the section is structurally
interconnected and the individual pictures flow into one another by sharing "common things."
Whitman accomplishes, through what Warren calls "syntactic parallelism and anaphora," the
effect of rhythm and, thereby, cohesion (378). While Whitman delights in juxtaposing opposites
like "the farmer" and "the lunatic," he also transforms opposites into congruencies. It is a type
of paratactical syntax; the reader, following the rhythmic properties, is forced into making
connections. Almost every line consists of a naming noun of an individual or group of
individuals, followed by a third person active present verb, followed by an object or transitive
verb phrase. This repetition in line structure creates poetic cohesion. Cohesion in structure
creates a sort of unconnected narrative with "stories embedded in the images but left implied
and untold" (Holcomb 135).

Yet creating a paratactical syntax of unity only implies that the represented individuals
are united; it is not explicit. The reader, while making these structural connections, still needs
to encompass the vast differences between each individual experience in order to find that
"common self" through the "motives all of us [the American masses] share" (Pease 115, 119).
This is accomplished through the anaphoric repetition of the article "the" and through the
repeated use of the third person active verb. Each individual is marked by the definitive article,"the." An important function served by the use of definite or indefinite articles "is to tag a piece
of information as new or already known to readers" [emphasis in original] (Holcomb 18). By
using the personal "the" the speaker marks each individual as known to the reader. The use of
the definite article allows the speaker to create "the illusion that we are part of the fictive
world... listening to the story like an observer present on the scene" (19). The illusion
emphasizes the dialogic nature of the images. The reader is the listening observer; the speaker
is the speaking observer. Additionally, each individual within the line is actively doing
something, usually a type of labor. Sings, seizes, heaves, works, travels, marks, run, spouts,
waxes, and beats are just some of the "doing" verbs included in the catalogue. In each line, the reader is asked to watch someone(s) do something(s). This creates more than just poetic cohesion; it creates a "common self." Every individual in the catalogue must do some sort of job whether it be "sings in the organ loft," "retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel," or "bears the well-riddled target." Likewise, individuals share leisure activities, family life, and their societies include outcasts like "the lunatic," "the malformed limbs," "the quadroon girl," and "the prostitute." By naming each person and by using the third person active verb, the speaker creates a recognizable society, one with common motifs of work, play, and interplay between different classes, positions, and races.

By presenting each individual as part of a larger society the speaker is once again leading the reader to a specific viewpoint. The reader is expected to make the same connections as the speaker as they observe each image, becoming, in essence, one with the speaker. The active nature of the verbs also serves to bring immediacy to the section. Each individual is not only doing something, they are all doing things at the same time, in synchronization. The reader, watching this flood of connected and active images is expected to imagine, alongside the speaker, a specific type of American "imagined community." Equally, the vernacular and Americanisms included create a specific American sound or voice. The reader hears the unique cadence of American speech alongside the images. This one section effectively images a large scale community, complete with visuals, movement, and sound.

The series of imaging lines is followed by the second part of the cataloging stanza which diverts from cataloging individuals and focuses on the relationships between them. Starting with the "Fourth of July," the speaker focuses the reader on a specific "common thing" that is a shared continuum by all Americans, past, present, and future. Inherent connectivity between what is, what has been, and what will be is specified by "the indescribable crowd;" named to emphasize the diversity of race, gender, culture, and historical time period while concurrently establishing a whole or "crowd" (Whitman 10). This refers back to the named individuals in the earlier section because the reader is expected to imagine all those known individuals as part of this "indescribable crowd."
The section’s movements reinforce implied connections made in the earlier individualistic stanzas. The reader, already prepared to see a united whole, has his viewpoint pulled back from the closely focused individualistic lines and now sees the many interactions between individual and whole. Yet he remains a static viewer. He does not participate in the images but merely views them through the speaker’s lens and follows the argument. However, in the final two lines the speaker concludes by bringing both himself and the reader into the “crowd,” saying:

And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am. (Whitman 11).

Like the “grass” section all the previous lines have led to this conclusion. The speaker forcefully occupies the poet prophet location and incorporates all of the named individuals into himself, even more explicitly creating a whole. He identifies himself both within and overseeing the unity of the individuals, they “tend inward to me” but he, equally, “tend[s] outward to them.” A few lines later he brings the reader into the relationship saying “These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me. / If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing” (11). The reader, the speaker, and all the named individuals share this “thought.”

Whitman continues to use cataloging stanzas throughout the poem. They layer over each other, focusing on different parts of American society. Each initially focuses on individuals and “spots of time,” then refocuses on the connections between the individuals so that by the end of “Song of Myself” it is clear that these cataloging stanzas are used to show the many different “common things” in America. By continually switching the reader’s perspective they provide many examples to support the overall argument.

Conclusion:

In the last section of “Song of Myself” the speaker declares, “I am large.... I contain multitudes” (42). In many ways this summarizes Whitman’s poem. Throughout the poem the speaker categorically visualizes every detail of American society and absorbs it into himself, he “contain[s] multitudes.” As poet prophet he is the representative for society and with this authority he images his society into a united whole, finding and pinpointing the “common
things” that connect varied individuals. His power as poet prophet is shared with his reader, asking, “Will you speak before I am gone? Will you prove already too late?” and “Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems” (42, 1). The reader is not an absent presence in this poem but a silent participant in the ongoing dialogic argument. Additionally, the often indistinct reader’s position allows the reader to occupy, at different points, the speaker’s position the American everyman. The vague position of the reader combines poet prophet authority with democracy; there is no absolute speaker, every speaker is authoritative. Furthermore, by making the reader an authoritative voice the reader is complicit in the poem’s argument for nationalism.

“Song of Myself” exemplifies the American nationalism that Whitman wanted to inspire throughout America. It glorifies individuality through free verse, Americanisms, and close attention to individual lived experiences. Yet the poem goes beyond the individual to create a unified whole, using the very things that represent diversity to represent unity. As the democratic catalogues have demonstrated, each individual act is similar to another individual act. Furthermore, by occupying the poet prophet location, Whitman draws upon himself the power to “legislate the world.” Yet he shares, in democratic fashion, this power with his reader, sharing his “atom[s]” (Whitman 1). Whitman hoped his poetry would be “absorbed” by the masses, and, by being “absorbed,” that each individual reader would be transformed by his unique American language into a new way of “seeing” America. This is the purpose of “Song of Myself” and, more extensively, Leaves of Grass, to convert individual readers into nationalists.
Works Cited


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Image, Imaging and Reimaging—this is my coined, functional shift of the word “image” that draws on the idea of visualization through specific images or pictures. I think it is especially appropriate for Whitman because he is not simply visualizing a specific image for the use of description, nor is he explicitly imagining something. Instead, he is lining up images to paint a larger, cohesive whole.