“To Confront a Portrait:” Photography, Parts, and the Whole in the Poetry of Walt Whitman

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Walt Whitman was the most photographed poet of the 19th century. How, then, did photography—if at all—impact his poetry? This essay argues that Whitman used photographs and the figure of photography to explore Emerson’s ‘each and all’ concept, and to illuminate how individuals add up to the ‘all’ of America. In order to do so, I parallel two of Whitman’s greatest projects: Leaves of Grass and his photographs of the self. I consider the book history of Leaves of Grass, paying particularly close attention to the materiality of Whitman’s revision and his photographs. I argue that Leaves of Grass functions as an analogy for a “photo album,” the additions of new poems and changing of photographs emblematic of the addition of photographs. Along the way, I make a related claim about the collection’s emphasis on the body in relation to Whitman’s body, and how the emphasis on the body relates to the advent of photography. As the advent of the photograph also coincided with the Civil War, Whitman’s allure of photography likely stemmed from the potential of photographs to mend and heal the nation and the self through memorialization as much as from the failure to conceal the trauma of battlefield carnage.

During his lifetime, American poet Walt Whitman was immersed in a culture of visual art—especially photographs. In a conversation with his biographer and friend Horace Traubel, Whitman once said: “I think the painter has much to do to go ahead of the best photographs” [1]. Whitman’s preference for photography likely stemmed from his own obsession with photographs of the self. As the poet himself observed in another conversation with Traubel: “I have been photographed, photographed, photographed, until the cameras themselves are tired of me” [2]. But as Ed Folsom proposes in Walt Whitman’s Native Representations (1994), Whitman’s obsession with photography also extended beyond the curious desire to see the self. He notes, “Whitman was of the first generation to experience the world in photographic images; his poetry emerged at precisely the time photography was literally taking a hold of the American imagination. Whitman’s poetics, of course, were in large part built to meld the mechanical and the spiritual to discover and sing the deeper meaning of science…” [3]. Folsom primarily focuses on how the advent of photography in America fascinated Whitman, and how the circulation of photographs allowed Whitman and other Americans to see previously unexplored sections of the country. Yet Folsom’s work does not fully address why Whitman was particularly drawn to the photograph.

To explore this question, I turn to Whitman’s relationship to his contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson, a transcendentalist whose poetry and essays influenced Whitman’s famous poetry collection, Leaves of Grass. More specifically, this essay argues that Whitman used photographs and the figure of photography to explore Emerson’s ‘each and all’ concept, and to illuminate how individuals add up to the ‘all’ of America. In order to do so, I parallel two of Whitman’s greatest projects: Leaves of Grass and his photographs of the self. I consider the book history of Leaves of Grass, paying particularly close attention to the materiality of Whitman’s revision and his photographs. Not only did Whitman publish nine versions of Leaves of Grass, but he also included a new photograph of himself in almost every edition. I argue that Leaves of Grass functions as an analogy for a “photo album,” the additions of new poems and changing of photographs emblematic of the addition of photographs. Along the way, I make a related claim about the collection’s emphasis on the body in relation to Whitman’s body, and how the emphasis on the body relates to the advent of photography. While my analysis considers Leavess of Grass as a whole, I pay particularly close attention to “Out from Behind This Mask [To Confront a Portrait].” I argue that the speaker addresses the photographs to mimic the act of parts of becoming whole, the act of the individual becoming universal.

Whitman’s interest in Emerson’s writing and ideals is apparent in Whitman’s earliest edition of Leaves of Grass. In the Preface to that 1855 edition, Whitman writes: “Nothing out of its place is good and nothing in its place is bad” [4]. Whitman’s remark echoes the Emersonian concept of “each and all,” which Emerson uses to explain the relationship between the part and the whole, the individual and the universal. As Norman Miller explains, Emerson’s poem “Each and All” moves through “a series of three ‘cases’ in which particulars—a sparrow, sea shells, a virgin—are removed from their proper setting and ‘brought home.’ Each loses its charm and beauty when isolated from its natural environment” [5]. For Emerson and Whitman, the “each and all” concept hinges primarily on wholeness: “Given this nature, [Emerson’s philosophy] resists penetration and probing.
Tear it at one point and the whole construct falls” [5]. For Emerson and Whitman, each part was necessary for an adequate whole.

Whitman’s fascination with the “each and all” concept emerges not only in his poetry but also in his relationship to photography. In his biography of the poet, Horace Trauibel details an 1889 encounter with Whitman and his photographs: “If I could get a book to suit me, into which I could put the pictures to suit me, I would be happy. I wonder if it could be done?—a book about this size?”—[Whitman said], measuring about a foot square. “Not necessarily larger—or larger at all.’ He had a great mess of pictures around and had often thought to collect them” [1]. Whitman’s desire to put his photographs together into one album implies a desire to make the parts of the self become whole, a desire that often overshadowed his own poetry. Housed in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, the Walt Whitman papers offer additional evidence that Whitman was obsessed with collecting photographs of the self together into one locality. On April 14, 1887, while reading at a lecture in remembrance of President Lincoln and Madison Square Theater, Whitman handed out a small pamphlet not of his poetry but of his photographs. The photographs present Whitman in an array of poses, ages, and locations: a younger Whitman looking slightly to the right, an old Whitman to the left, Whitman recovering from his stroke in a wheel-chair, Whitman lying down on the ground with a dog [6].

Whitman’s desire to collect his photographs into one album resembles the process he used to create Leaves of Grass. Whitman began to write Leaves of Grass in 1855, when the collection consisted of a mere twelve poems, lacking any organization. Over the course of forty years he continued to revise and add new poems to the collection. Following four decades and eight editions, Whitman produced the final “deathbed” edition of Leaves of Grass, which included over 400 poems. In addition to adding poems, Whitman also began to organize the collection into a more cohesive whole. As Betsy Erkkiola observes, “[the] most significant change in the 1881 Leaves is not the addition of new poems but Whitman’s restricting of the entire volume into a final coherent form” [7]. For Whitman, the arranging of poems and photographs into one collection, it seems, was an essential aspect of the artistic process.

While comparing collecting photographs of the self to collecting poems about America may seem to be unrelated, the presence of the body nonetheless resonates throughout Leaves of Grass. Building upon this central premise, Erkkiola suggests parallels between Whitman’s body and America: “And yet there had always been a curious correspondence between Whitman’s body and the body politic of America: His body seemed at times a National seismograph, registering disturbances in the political sphere” [7]. Although Erkkiola neglects the association of photography to the body, it is important to note that the advent of photography brought an emphasis on the body, portraits, and the self.

Whitman reveals the relationship of poet, body, and nation in the edits to his 1855 poem, “I Sing the Body Electric.” “I sing the body electric, / The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them” [4]. Here, the speaker “sings the body,” implying a celebration of the body. However, the relationship of the speaker’s “body” appears to be symbiotic with that of the “arm[y’s]”: the speaker’s body “engirth[s]”—surrounds—the “armies” as the

Figure 1. This photograph shows Whitman in 1881, the year he famously reorganized Leaves of Grass.

“armies” “engirth” the speaker. In essence, the speaker unifies the part (the individual) and the whole (the armies) through the figure of the body. Whitman’s edits reveal a heightened importance of the body, likely as a result from the carnage of the Civil War. In fact, “electric” might refer to the electricity that was used for the staged photographs of Whitman’s later portraits, and the staged photographs of dead soldiers.

Whitman draws again upon the body to explore the relationship between the self and the nation in “The Sobbing of the Bells,” this time to explore American suffering [4]. The poem begins by the personification of the “sobbing…bells.” Here, the sounds of the city emulate the tears of a person. The speaker continues, describing how the people “(Full well return, respond / within their breasts, their / brains, the sad reverberations).” Structurally, the poem moves from the personified images of the country to the literal descriptions of the citizens, which underscores the subtle equation of nationhood and body that seems to inhere in the initial metaphor. The description returns back to the city scape, as the speaker depicts “The passionate toll and clang, / City to city joining, sounding / passing.” The “joining” of the cities suggests an attempt to mark parts whole, to connect the fragments of the nation. The repetition of noises, then, prime the poem for its final metaphor: “Those heart-beats of a Nation / in the Night.” The subtle equation of body and nation becomes complete, as the “sobbing…bells” have now become “heart-beats of a Nation.” Like the “sobbing…bells,” the speaker personifies the Nation; namely, the “heart-beats” belong not to the individuals but to a vital, unifying force. While the poem eulogizes the assassination President James Garfield, “The Sobbing of the Bells” also seems to emulate Whitman’s famous
1881 photographic portrait, which displays the poet sitting down with his cane, a symbol of the poet’s faltering health [4](See Image 1).

Recalling Erkkila’s observation of the relationship between Whitman’s body and the nation, the parallel between Whitman’s 1881 photograph and “The Sobbing of the Bells”—the body and nation—reveals the potential for Whitman’s photographs of the self to symbolize the whole of the nation.

In addition to the body’s importance to Whitman’s poetic aesthetic, the inclusions of Whitman’s own body via photograph was also an integral part of each edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In an 1881 letter to James Osgood, Whitman reveals his anxiety over selecting the right photograph: “How would the enclosed picture do for a frontispiece? I like it—it is made by Gutekunst” [8]. In his critical work, Sean Meehan reminds us that according to Whitman, “[the frontispiece] represents the book’s autobiography soul,” and presumably the implicit relationship between a photo album of the self and a book of poetry [9]. And as Ed Folsom proposes, Whitman also included photographs of the self in a more poetic sense: “Whitman’s most direct poetic statement about the power of the photographic face is ‘Out from behind This Mask [To Confront a Portrait]…Whitman made it clear that the poem referred to W. J. Linton’s woodcut of George Potter’s 1871 photograph of the poet, which had appeared in the 1876 *Leaves*. But Whitman set the poem floating free of this portrait in *Leaves*, so that the subtitle not only invites the reader to hear the poem as a poetic statement literally confronting the Linton/Potter portrait, but also as a kind of general tutorial on how we should confront any portrait, any photograph of the face” [3]. As Folsom suggests, the first lines of the poem emulate the process of woodcutting, and the “bending rough-cut mask” evokes the process of transferring a photograph into a woodcut, the same process that was used to place Whitman’s portrait in *Leaves of Grass*.

While Folsom argues that “Out from behind This Mask [To Confront a Portrait]” depicts the speaker examining a photograph of the self, he does not explore the full implications of the poem’s language. Recalling photography’s historical moment in context of Whitman’s life, Sean Meehan proposes: “The play and provocative uncertainty that Whitman reads in every photo, and makes much of in this instance, derives, most crucially, from the creative potential of photo reproduction, the play and moment of the photographic process that allows the reality of an image to be approximated and continuously revised” [9]. The paradigm of “provocative uncertainty,” the “approximated and continuously revised [reality],” emerges here in “Out from behind This Mask [To Confront a Portrait].” To begin, the poem’s first four lines are highly evocative of Emerson’s “each and all concept”: “this drama of the whole / This common curtain of the face contain’d in me for me, in you / for you, in each for each” [4]. The figure of the “common curtain” alludes to the relationship between individual and universal: the photograph stands in for both the speaker and for the collective American consciousness. The repetition of “me,” “you,” and “each” emulates the relationship of the speaker and the photograph, implying a sense of reproduction.
In “Out from Behind This Mask,” the speaker also describes his own face as a “limitless small continent” and as a “soundless sea,” revealing the allure of nature for Whitman. Returning to the theme of equality, “small continent” and “sea” quite literally describe the actual photograph, the parallel structure highlighting that neither aspect of nature appears superior to the other. Moreover, “limitless” and “soundless” both suggest the photography’s ability to remain unfathomable to the speaker, opening up the speaker’s power of imagination. Together, the “limitless continent” and the “soundless sea” form the “heart’s geography’s map:” the “limitless,” “soundless” whole of the external world’s geography simultaneously becomes a representation for the speaker’s inward experience. Certainly, the speaker’s use of the photograph for the imagination emulates the “provocative uncertainty that Whitman reads in every photo” [9].

The speaker’s imaginative use of the photograph extends beyond seeing aspects of Earth and toward understanding the relationship of part to whole between the self and the infinite. For the speaker, the photograph comes to symbolize “the convolutions of this globe,” which underscores the complexity of the Earth [4]. The speaker, then, uses the photograph to explore how the Earth itself is a part to a greater whole, a “subtler astronomical orb than sun or moon, than Jupiter, Venus, Mars” [4]. In observing the Earth becoming a part to the whole of the universe, the speaker implies too that he is a part of a vast universe. At the end of the stanza, the visions of Heaven and Hell; land and sea; global and universal become “[e]this condensation of the universe”—“a look” [4]. It seems that the “provocative uncertainty” of the photograph ultimately allows the speaker to examine how every part—the afterlife, nature, the universe—come together into one photograph. Or as John Mason proposes, the “reader” becomes involved “in the poet’s movement from “the singular to the cosmic” [10]. Building upon Mason’s premise, it seems that the speaker in “Out from Behind This Mask [To Confront a Portrait]” uses the photograph to become a part of America and a part of the universe—the ultimate form of egalitarianism.

Whitman equally reflects the relationship of part to whole in the poem’s poetic structure. The second stanza reveals a tension between independent present tense verbs (“I greet,” “I… turn”) against noun phrases with past or present participles (“A traveler of thoughts and years,” “Lingering a moment here and now,” “Pausing, inclining, baring my head”) [4]. To borrow Helen Vendler’s term, this demonstrates Whitman’s poetic thinking, his attempt to “compress a multifaceted scene, distributed over sequential time, into a single momentary gestalt” [11]. The model of the “momentary gestalt” emerges through the figure of the photograph: that is, the part (the photograph) takes the role of the whole (a momentary gestalt). The speaker uses the one instance in his life that the photograph depicts to see “A traveler of thoughts and years,” “Of youth long sped and middle age declining” [4]. The photograph allows the speaker to both see a “soul…once inseparable[e] with [his]”—the former self—while also recalling the changes the speaker has undergone since the photograph was taken [4]. Time, then, begins to exist not on a horizontal, temporal plane but rather as a gestalt: the whole that is the speaker is perceived as more than the sum of his time spent living.

The speaker’s effort to interpret the photograph into one “drama[tic]…whole” parallels Whitman’s own attempts to make meaning out of his collection of photographs. While describing his mess of photographs, Whitman explains: “It is hard to extract a man’s real self—any man—from such a chaotic mass—from such historic debris” [1]. Like the speaker who has traveled through “peace and war,” Whitman used his mess of photographs to symbolize the process of understanding the trauma of the Civil War—of the whole splitting apart—upon the self. In this light, Whitman’s poetic speaker might also function as a synecdoche for the nation. As America underwent an identity crisis from antebellum to postbellum, so does the speaker. However, the analysis of the photograph also functions as a tool for the speaker’s introspection—for healing. In his interpretation of the poem, Folsom likens “Out from Behind This Mask [To Confront a Portrait]” to Whitman’s Civil War poems, highlighting the importance of the face: “The faces in Whitman’s poems become more pervasive and haunting in the Civil War poems, where soldiers’ faces again and again look into his own as he peers into and remembers face after face…” [3]. Drawing upon Emerson’s “each and all” concept, the speaker’s face becomes both individual and universal, allowing the portrait to embody the faces of “Tragedies, sorrows, laughter, tears,” “of peace and war”—the soldiers of the Civil War [4]. The relationship of individual to universal, then, might also echo the relationship of photograph to photo album. As Folsom observes, “All of these faces stay in the memory like an album of photographs of the lost and dead, a poetic echo of Brody and Gardner and O’Sullivan photos of the Civil War dead” [3]. (See Image 2) Whitman’s attraction to photography likely stemmed from the potential of photographs to mend and heal the nation and the self through memorialization as much as from the failure to conceal the trauma of battlefield carnage.

While one can only speculate, Whitman’s fascination with photography might have influenced his decision to write in free verse. As Grossman proposes, “The argument that made the meter of Whitman was the unification of the world in the one power of language, the secret authority of the poet…the bestowal of presence across time” [12]. Whitman’s photographs of the self also fulfill a similar function: unifying the public by the shared experience of seeing the poet through his photograph in every edition of Leaves of Grass. Certainly, Whitman has succeeded in bestowing his presence among 21st century readers. Whether or not we agree with David S. Reynolds that the photograph is “an
Despite Whitman's unquestionable fascination with photography, Whitmanians have largely ignored this aspect of his work and life, chiefly because of a crucial lack of order with respect to his photographs. Upon Whitman's death, his photographs were divided among three different literary executors, scattering into the abyss of libraries and other collections. As Horace Traubel observes, William Douglas O'Connor sought to make the photographs of Whitman's life an adequate whole: "I shall take care to have it full and complete: it would make a most remarkable presentment: I have always desired to do the thing" [1]. Unfortunately, O'Connor never put the photographs together into an album. Certainly, Whitman may have predicted the fragmentation of his photographs and materials, leaving scholars like Ed Folsom and myself to recollect Whitman's photographs of the self into an adequate whole, and to illuminate how those photographs retell the story of *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman was interested by the power that photographs possessed to trace the evolution of the self, and to explore how the body could function as a metaphor for the United States. These metaphors of the self and the body, alongside photographs, allowed Whitman to make parts whole, to mend and heal the nation from the wounds of the Civil War.

REFERENCES

6. The Walt Whitman Collection, Box 1, Folder 22. Printed Ephemera from 1887. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
8. The Walt Whitman Collection, Box 1, Folder 4. Letter to James Osgood, 1881. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

IMAGE SOURCES


FOOTNOTES

1. To clarify, in *Leaves of Grass*, the image included was actually an engraving based on a photograph. At the time, it was not possible to effectively transfer a daguerreotype into print.

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Born and raised on the border of Illinois and Wisconsin, Alex Torres is a junior at Stanford University pursuing a BA in English Literature and a Minor in Spanish. He studies American poetry, and has conducted archival research on Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Américo Paredes, Jean Toomer, and Allen Ginsberg. A recipient of the Cantor Scholars Award, Alex was the first undergraduate to curate an exhibition at the Cantor Arts Center. Alex is also a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow and a former Chappell Lougee Scholar. He recently presented research on poetry and music at the American Literature Symposium in San Antonio. For the 2015-2016 school year, Alex was selected to receive the Deans’ Award for Academic Achievement.