Collage of Myself

Matt Miller

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COLLAGE OF MYSELF
Collage of Myself

Walt Whitman and the Making of *Leaves of Grass*

MATT MILLER

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For Mona Jorgensen
and Lana Miller
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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

This book is a case study of the creative process, a demonstration of how Walt Whitman composed his early poems, and a reevaluation of the origins of collage as a practice in Western art. Here, I explore an enduring mystery in American literary studies: the question of how Walter Whitman, a rather undistinguished newspaperman and author of potboiler temperance fiction, transformed himself with astonishing speed into the author of America’s most celebrated collection of poems. This book documents a new and surprising achievement by America’s most famous poet: over a half-century before the word *collage* was applied to Picasso’s pioneering use of the technique in the visual arts, Whitman was conceptualizing and practicing a similar artistic method with language in the groundbreaking poems of *Leaves of Grass*.

Many theories have been proposed to explain Whitman’s creative breakthrough, but prior research has faced significant obstacles due to scant and inaccessible manuscript evidence and misunderstandings about the period in Whitman’s life leading up to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. After more than a century of Whitman scholarship, we still know surprisingly little about how he came to write his first mature poems, and almost all investigations thus far have explored his breakthrough by way of speculative accounts of his biography, with most recent scholarship stressing incidents related to his politics and sexuality. Rather than use an outside event to explain his creative maturation, I look at his writing process itself, using the Walt
Whitman Archive’s online collection of digital images to reveal his discovery of an enabling new process of composition. My findings force a revision of our understanding not only of *Leaves of Grass*, but of the origins of collage, a technique increasingly seen as the most important and enduring contribution of modernism, as well as a signature creative method of subsequent postmodern artists.

Given the intense critical interest his work has received, it might seem remarkable that this is the first book-length study of Whitman’s notebooks and manuscripts. This lacuna in Whitman scholarship is largely due to the fact that collections of Whitman’s manuscripts are scattered around the world in more than thirty archival repositories, making systematic access to them extraordinarily difficult. The Whitman scholar Edward Grier published transcripts of most of Whitman’s prose manuscripts in 1984, yet no effort was made to edit and collect the poetry manuscripts until the Walt Whitman Archive undertook this massive, ongoing task. These scholarly obstacles are compounded by the fact that many of the most precious and important collections are sealed from public view because of their fragility and limited availability in facsimile editions and reproductions. Editorial scholarship hasn’t yet adequately addressed these issues, and the material that Whitman left behind has never been systematically collected and transcribed. My involvement with the Walt Whitman Archive’s comprehensive online collection of digital manuscript images has allowed me to move beyond these problems and address some important misunderstandings.

Until recently it has been assumed that Whitman was drafting lines for *Leaves of Grass* long before its 1855 debut, but I use the notebooks to demonstrate that until around 1854 he was unaware that his literary ambitions would assume the form of poetry at all. I show that there is no extant evidence that Whitman, who once speculated that
Leaves would be a “spiritual novel” or a play, drafted any poetic lines whatsoever between 1848 and 1853. Shortly thereafter he discovered a remarkable new creative process, allowing him to transform a diverse array of text, including diary-like observations, reading notes, clippings from newspapers and scholarly articles, and language stolen or paraphrased from books, into the breakthrough poems of Leaves of Grass. Long before a term for the method was coined, Whitman pioneered the creative technique now most commonly known as collage, anticipating subsequent work by the modernists, including Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Marianne Moore, as well as the visual and literary collage work of the Dadaists and Surrealists. Equally prescient was the attitude toward language that allowed for Whitman’s innovations, and this study also details the critical resonance between Whitman’s approach and more recent theoretical discourse describing how the use of found materials—creative methods known variously as collage, montage, and bricolage—have been critical in the development of literary and visual art.

In the first chapter, “How Whitman Used His Early Notebooks,” I examine the most important of Whitman’s earliest literary notebooks and show how editorial misunderstandings have led to misconceptions of the poet’s life in the years just prior to the publication of the first Leaves of Grass. Even the best-informed Whitman scholars have assumed that he was drafting poetic lines for years prior to his literary debut, but my corrected dating of his notebooks demonstrates that until about a year before his book’s publication Whitman had no idea that his literary life’s work would be undertaken as a poet. In his manuscripts composed just prior to the publication of the first Leaves of Grass Whitman seems to be seeking some altogether new genre in which to express himself, which underscores just how malleable his concept of genre had become and suggests that Leaves

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of Grass might well have taken a radically different form. His diverse experiments in fiction, oratory, and poetic theory bore little fruit until he discovered his signature poetic line, a capacious vehicle that allowed him to transform aborted forays in other types of writing into major poems such as “Song of Myself.” From scraps of language both original and stolen Whitman pieced together his poetic body; thus his role in the conception of Leaves of Grass is less its midwife than its Dr. Frankenstein.

The second chapter, “Packing and Unpacking the First Leaves of Grass,” demonstrates the ferocity of Whitman’s textual manipulations. Influenced by his nomadic lifestyle, his words too were constantly on the move, not only from house to house, reflecting his migratory ways, but within his notebooks themselves, as he simulated a kind of primitive word processor, “cutting and pasting” his lines into multitudinous arrangements and forms. This chapter emphasizes the fragmentary nature of Whitman’s compositional method, stressing how the poet’s pervasive and ferocious approach to revision broke language down into increasingly smaller and more portable units. This approach to writing, at once compositional and deconstructive, allowed Whitman ready access to various and multiple formulations for his poetic ideas, drafts that were continually shifting and adjusting to new artistic priorities and conceptualizations of his audience. I use a sexually charged passage later published in “The Sleepers” as a case study of this process and juxtapose its manuscript stages to expose Whitman’s evolving motivations. What was once an explicitly homosexual depiction evolves into an ambiguous scene that encourages readers of various sexual orientations to project their own desires and come away with satisfying readings.

Where the second chapter emphasizes the mobile, fragmentary nature of Whitman’s approach to language, the third, “Kosmos Poets
and Spinal Ideas,” examines the conceptual frameworks that hold his poems together. Whitman called these organizing principals “spinal ideas,” structural paradigms that allowed him to organize his scattered drafts without sacrificing the fragmentation, multiplicity, and fluidity essential to his project. In practice these concepts became mobile centers of gravity that could attract and structure his words without subordinating them to predictable metrical, narrative, or rhetorical ideas of order — ideas that Whitman believed reflected a rigid, unitary outlook too closely bound to outmoded European conventions. The phrase spinal ideas suggests both the spine of a book and that of a human body, but his bodily metaphor exists in tense relation to the decentered and asymmetrical results. Anticipating the formulations of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Whitman’s rhizomatic formal constructs eschewed the unitary architectural model of his poetic contemporaries and embraced a fluid, adaptive approach whereby text and meaning accrete around key nodal concepts. This chapter explores one of the most important of these spinal ideas, the poet’s concept of dilation, and traces its development in a manuscript passage in which Whitman “enters into” a slave and a slaveholder in the same breath.

In the fourth chapter, “Poems of Materials,” I relate Whitman’s collage-like creative method to his underlying attitude toward language and text. The idea of a “poem of materials” holds dual meaning, suggesting work that offers the materials for readers to construct their own lives and poems, as well as a poem stressing the material nature of the printed word. The idea is especially apparent in Whitman’s catalogs and lists, where language is presented as something fundamentally exterior to one’s identity and selfhood, while at the same time it is something that, through his particular poetic alchemy, can be assumed into a new and poetically enlarged self-formulation.
In such passages Whitman attempts to conflate word and object, promising readers a more direct and physical engagement with language than previous poets had indicated was possible. Focusing on an underappreciated poem, the 1856 “Broad-Axe Poem” (later titled “Song of the Broad-Axe”), I map the concept of a poem of materials onto a specific published work. As subsequent artists did with found-art objects, Whitman deployed “ready-made” examples of language to critique the nature of his medium, the role of the artist, and the locus of reception for art in its audience.

In the final chapter, “Whitman after Collage / Collage after Whitman,” I explore the significance of Whitman’s discoveries in relation to subsequent artists and writers. So revolutionary were some of these ideas that, in order to come to grips with them, we must read back to Whitman through the lens of what we now know. Although the poet himself may not have accurately anticipated the scope and application of the concepts he pioneered, history has begun to catch up with him, allowing us to more fully assess his accomplishment. This chapter suggests that many of the most important concepts of recent, forward-thinking art movements were anticipated directly by Whitman’s poems and critical statements. Using concepts from the visual arts, focusing especially on Marcel Duchamp and subsequent conceptual art practices, I interpret the significance of Whitman’s achievement in this coda to my exploration of his creative process, revealing how the conventional, transatlantic conception of the roots of modernism is complicated and enriched by our recognition of Whitman’s originality.
Abbreviations


