

**“If you will only:”
The Presence of Loneliness in “Song of Myself”
Jordan Radke**

Excerpt 1

Walt Whitman loved letters. To him—especially as he became a shut-in in his later years—these letters were the medium through which he could uncover the intimate thoughts, feelings, and diurnal affairs of those with whom he corresponded.¹ Indeed, he cared for little else in his letters: “I like letters to be personal—very personal—and then stop.”² To assume anything other than plain speech and quotidian subject matter—especially literary affectation—would be contrived and superfluous. “I never think about literary perfection in letters, either,” Whitman writes, “It is the *man* and the *feeling*.”³ So, for Whitman, his letters represented a commerce and a fellowship with his fellow man, not regarding esoteric or lofty subjects, but common ones, the ones that held them together: “dear friends & every little personal item & what you all do & say &c.”⁴ These interactions Whitman clearly valued highly, yet there is an edge, an anxiety present in the missives as well. To Hugo Fritsch, he prompts, “write oftener,”⁵ the mark of a man craving human contact. To the Civil War soldier Lewis K. Brown, whom Whitman met during his stint as a volunteer nurse for the Union, he writes, “You need never care how you write to me, Lewy, if you will only.”⁶ Though this passage can be read as a testament to Whitman’s preference for plain speak, there are also deeper forces at work. The indirect request “If you will only” leaves Whitman dependent and vulnerable, subject to the caprice of his correspondent, Brown.⁷ Even though Whitman is expansive and demonstrative in his letters (calling him “Lew,” “Lewy,” “my

¹ Edwin Haviland Miller, *Selected Letters of Walt Whitman* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), xvii

² *Ibid.*, xv.

³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁷ In fact, their correspondence would eventually taper out by 1864, according to *The Correspondence* by Edwin H. Miller.

darling boy,” and “dear son,”⁸) there is no guarantee Brown will return this effusion. This is where, despite his overwhelming fondness for these interactions, the uncertainty and thus anxiety inherent to his correspondence, and also “Song of Myself,” lay.

The encounters in the poem are likewise centered on fellowship—it is a celebration of man’s commonality, told by a speaker with an ego of professedly unbounded, epic scope, through a medium of often epic form. Yet, the speaker, so enthralled by the union and connection of people he embodies, can still seem remarkably lonely at times. I argue that, despite the poem’s emphasis on communion, the speaker is an overall lonely, distant figure. This is a notion substantiated in the poem’s “lyric” moments, in the speaker’s itinerant tendencies, and in his constant addresses to the reader. Furthermore the speaker’s epic, national tendencies to enclose all around him can be explained to be a function of this loneliness, defining the central, pervasive anxiety of the poem, one of unrequited love for his reader and his nation.

The idea of “Song of Myself”—and Whitman’s initial 1855 *Leaves of Grass* in general—as a democratic text is a critically mainstream one^{9,10}. For example, David Reynolds argues, representatively, that the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* was a reaction to “the dissolving of boundaries between different occupational categories” as well as to an American culture of “beliefs and tastes that many ... shared,” even in a time of division and confusion¹¹. Reynolds argues that the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* was “a proclamation of these fertile cultural interactions.”¹² Thus, *Leaves of Grass* is a collection of instances of shared moments, interconnection and intimacy, much like Walt Whitman’s paradigm for letter writing was.

Excerpt 2

⁸ Miller, *Selected Letters*, 79-80.

⁹ David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

¹⁰ James E. Miller, Jr., *Leaves of Grass: America’s Lyric-Epic of Self and Democracy* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).

¹¹ Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 308.

¹² *Ibid.*, 308.

If this national voice makes the speaker in *Leaves of Grass* an “American bard” (as indeed Whitman claimed in one of the three anonymous reviews he wrote lauding the 1855 edition,¹³ this makes “Song of Myself” the epic he sings. Ostensibly, this characterization fits for a poem whose voice presumes to account for the breadth of American experiences and characters: according to Michael D. Hurley and Michael O’Neill, the epic lays claim “to being the most magisterial and inclusive of poetic genres.”¹⁴ O’Neill further characterizes the epic as having the “capacity to accommodate multiple modes and perspectives,”¹⁵ as Whitman does, largely by his extensive cataloguing throughout “Song of Myself.”

Still, this is an incomplete understanding of the poem, one that doesn’t take into consideration the speaker’s more meditative, lyrical impulses. In other words, even if the speaker assumes an “I” of epic proportions, he still employs another, personal “I” throughout, for the expression of a discrete, separate self—one whose presence is sometimes only latently felt in “Song of Myself.” Indeed, James E. Miller calls *Leaves of Grass* a blending of these two forms, crafted so that the speaker’s “eyes would be turned both inward and outward, and his voice would be both personal and public.”¹⁶ This personal, lyric voice—the speaker’s vehicle for expressing his loneliness—has been defined conventionally as being one “talking to itself, or to nobody”¹⁷ and is “associated with the expression of strong feeling.”¹⁸ Taking Miller’s argument for granted, the speaker in “Song of Myself” can then be seen as comprising an ego of two seemingly competing instincts: lyric and epic.¹⁹ The epic ego of the speaker is expansive and inclusive, nourished by the communion and fellowship of the multitudes he contains, while the

¹³ Adam Bradford, “Whitley, Edward. American Bards: Walt Whitman and Other Unlikely Candidates for National Poet [review].” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 29, no. 3 (2012), 106.

¹⁴ Michael D. Hurley and Michael O’Neill, *Poetic Form: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 120.

¹⁵ Hurley and O’Neill, *Poetic Form*, 121.

¹⁶ J. Miller, *Leaves of Grass*, 25.

¹⁷ David Lindley, *Lyric* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 51.

¹⁸ Hurley and O’Neill, *Poetic Form*, 53.

¹⁹ I’ll use the shorthand “lyric ego” and “epic ego,” not to imply that these two selves are separate, but that the speaker’s self encapsulates both of these modes. When I say “epic ego” I really just mean “the speaker’s tendency to embrace the norms of the epic genre.” The speaker’s self, I’d argue, is whole—just dominated by two seemingly competing impulses because of an underlying loneliness.

other, lyric ego of the speaker is a discrete, separate unit, an ultimately lonely creature, constantly reaching out and expanding to incorporate others to ease this lonesomeness.

Excerpt 3: Revision

Walt Whitman loved letters. To him—especially as he became a shut-in in his later years—these letters were the medium through which he could uncover the intimate thoughts, feelings, and diurnal affairs of those with whom he corresponded.²⁰ Indeed, he cared for little else in his letters: “I like letters to be personal—very personal—and then stop.”²¹ To assume anything other than plain speech and quotidian subject matter—especially literary affectation—would be contrived and superfluous. “I never think about literary perfection in letters, either,” Whitman writes, “It is the *man* and the *feeling*.”²² So, for Whitman, his letters represented a commerce and a fellowship with his fellow man, not regarding esoteric or lofty subjects, but common ones, the ones that held them together: “dear friends & every little personal item & what you all do & say &c.”²³ These interactions Whitman clearly valued highly, yet there is an edge, an anxiety present in the missives as well. To Hugo Fritsch, he prompts, “write oftener,”²⁴ the mark of a man craving human contact. To the Civil War soldier Lewis K. Brown, whom Whitman met during his stint as a volunteer nurse for the Union, he writes, “You need never care how you write to me, Lewy, if you will only.”²⁵

Though this passage can be read as a testament to Whitman’s preference for plain speak, there are also deeper forces at work. The indirect request “If you will only” leaves Whitman dependent and vulnerable, subject to the caprice of his correspondent, Brown.²⁶ Even though Whitman is expansive and demonstrative in his letters (calling him “Lew,” “Lewy,” “my darling

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²¹ *Ibid.*, xv.

²² *Ibid.*, 80.

²³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁶ In fact, their correspondence would eventually taper out by 1864, according to *The Correspondence* by Edwin H. Miller.

boy,” and “dear son,”²⁷) there is no guarantee Brown will return this effusion. Likewise, the speaker in Whitman’s “Song of Myself” similarly presses his reader: “Who need be afraid of the merge? /Undrape ... you are not guilty to me”²⁸ he writes, calling for a more intimate connection with someone unable to reciprocate his advance. Here is the same uncertainty—and thus anxiety—present in his correspondence.

With this anxiety in mind, regarding “Song of Myself”—and Whitman’s initial 1855 *Leaves of Grass* in general—as a democratic text is a critical orthodoxy^{29, 30}. Indeed, the encounters the poem are centered on fellowship—it is a celebration of man’s commonality, told by a speaker with an ego of professedly unbounded, epic scope, through a medium of often epic form. Yet, even the title of David Reynolds’s work, *Walt Whitman’s America*, hints at an incomplete understanding of the poem, one that takes the poet at his word, that he encompasses America, or can speak for its breadth of experience. In fact, the speaker, so enthralled by the union and connection of people he embodies, still seems remarkably lonely at times. I argue that, despite the poem’s emphasis on communion, considering “Song of Myself” as only a democratic text becomes misguided after reexamining the speaker, who is an overall lonely, distant figure. This is a notion substantiated in the poem’s “lyric” moments, in the speaker’s itinerant tendencies, and in his constant addresses to the reader. Furthermore the speaker’s epic, national tendencies to enclose all around him can be explained to be a function of this loneliness, defining the central, pervasive anxiety of the poem, one of unrequited love for his reader and his nation.

²⁷ Miller, *Selected Letters*, 79-80.

²⁸ Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1982), 33.

²⁹ David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

³⁰ James E. Miller, Jr., *Leaves of Grass: America’s Lyric-Epic of Self and Democracy* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).

Fellow Commentary

Brian Lax

If we consider thesis a promise to the reader, then this paper generates a quite compelling one. It proposes that, against a consideration of Walt Whitman as a generalized “American” voice, evidence from his “Song of Myself” points to a lonelier position. This piece marshals persuasive readings of the poem to induce a readerly 180: the argument persuades us not only because it offers a contrary argument or point of view, but also shows that this new imagination of an isolated Whitman is necessarily a corollary to the old one. In other words, these two oppositional images of Whitman can coexist—and even, perhaps, reinforce each other. Understanding the lonely Whitman becomes essential to appreciating the “aggregate” Whitman.

The current articulation of this thesis, however, differs dramatically from its first. It did not emerge faultlessly fashioned. Even within these excerpts, you get the sense that Jordan’s ideas matured in the physical writing of the ideas. While the first two excerpts are taken from Jordan’s accepted submission, the third comes from his then revised introduction. The first readily identifiable iteration of thesis, branded argumentatively, occurs in paragraph two of the first excerpt. It looks like this:

“I argue that, despite the poem’s emphasis on communion, the speaker is an overall, lonely, distant figure.”

This does a lot of great work: it substantively positions Jordan opposite the “critical mainstream.” However, implicit in this statement is the suggestion that the explanations of previous critics are just plain wrong. You get the sense that Jordan might be able to more *compassionately* articulate his opposition to the scholars at issue.

Consider the second excerpt, which in Jordan’s first draft occurs five pages into a 15-page essay—a third of the way through. Jordan writes,

“Still, this is an incomplete understanding of the poem, one that doesn’t take into consideration the speaker’s more meditative, lyrical impulses. In other words, even if the speaker assumes an ‘I of epic proportions, he still employs another, personal ‘I’ throughout, for the expression of a discrete, separate self—one whose presence is sometimes only latently felt in ‘Song of Myself.’”

Here, Jordan finally arrives at his thesis. He here not only mindfully portrays the previous criticism as *incomplete* (not “wrong”), but also outlines how his argument joins that criticism, in that his point becomes critical to grasping theirs.

With this in mind, we asked Jordan to revise his introduction. In addition to the promotion of his second, superior phrasing of thesis, we challenged him:

- To link his (savvy) readings of Whitman’s correspondences more immediately to a contiguous reading of “Song of Myself.” In this literature paper, Jordan’s introduction by way of historical sources sparkles. However, he forces the reader to take for granted the fact that the uncertainty present in Whitman’s letters also exists in the poem.

Playing devil’s advocate by theorizing a skeptical reader, we asked him to more quickly substantiate that link.

- To more fully sketch the “critical mainstream” before moving to oppose it. Again, a lazy reader might prefer to be shown the scholarship rather than being simply told it.

What we are doing is reverse outlining. We are diving back into the finished draft to identify where the thesis most clearly emerges. Jordan’s revision, or excerpt three, represents a significant improvement to the initial paper.

We publish two drafts of this excellent writing to suggest that writing is a process—and that quite frequently writers reach their best phrasing of thesis only midway through the initial drafting stage. Also, we want to suggest that a “contrarian” thesis that flips an intellectual conversation on its head does not need to shift tectonic plates: even a contrarian thesis can supplement an existing argument.

Author Commentary

Jordan Radke

This paper began, weirdly enough, with math (a prospective major for me). My first reading of “Song of Myself” was wide-eyed, exhilarated by the audacity of a poet professing to speak for the whole of American experience, and with his keen ability to render that experience. But my second reading took its critical cues from my math notes: that is, two sets are equal if and only if every element of one is an element of the other, and vice versa. The poem, from this perspective, becomes an exercise in faulty logic: “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” only indicates one set (the speaker) belongs to another (his reader, America)—the equality only holds if the reader donates all atoms as well, so to speak.

This is an admittedly weird way to read this opening charge. But, I think it’s still telling, and it motivated that second close reading of the poem—I wanted to know why the speaker would insist upon this equality, or, later in the poem (and more forcefully), upon the “merge” of he and his reader. It just turns out that the incongruity wasn’t idiosyncratic, but rather characteristic of the entire poem, at least I’d argue. I went to the library to see if anybody agreed with me. Some critics did, but most didn’t treat this anxiety as important as I thought it was. So, I tried to get closer to the man, Whitman himself. I checked out his correspondences, which are full of letters entreating their recipients to write back, or to write more—just to write. He’s lonely.

While it’s super interesting that the self-professed “American bard” could have been, in fact, lonely, my professor urged me to steer away from biographical criticism. He was right: the poem’s competing tendencies toward both loneliness and expansiveness are what make it so compellingly human. This sentiment led me to sources that examined this loneliness psychologically—one book on the psychology of Whitman, in particular, and another on loneliness, in general. Both were really helpful, and most likely not sources I would’ve gravitated toward were it not for my somewhat idiosyncratic close reading.