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Self as Interconnected Story in “Song of Myself”

Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” – the last version published in 1892 – has been noted for the extreme detail in its sensory description. As such, throughout the following decades, the poem has been often interpreted as a mystical experience. Chanita Goodblatt and Joseph Glicksohn proposed viewing “Song of Myself” as a series of altered states of consciousness – a meditative state of extreme mindfulness. Goodblatt and Glicksohn argue that the extreme sensory and detail paint a vivid view of nature that encourages understanding the perceptual world through *recording*, or observation of what is present, rather than construction – the more routine method of perception that imposes other categorizations and objects upon the perceived entity. Similarly, James E. Miller, another literary critic, argues that Whitman’s “Song of Myself” is an *inverted mystical experience*, or a mystical experience structure that questions and alters traditional mystic values of self-surrender and union with the Divine. Whitman’s alteration, Miller asserts, highlights instead the importance of reliance on self in navigating the world. Goodblatt, Glicksohn, and Miller all contribute to a certain stream of analysis that argues “Song of Myself” uses mystical experience to argue for a nonconventional relationship between the self and their environment.

These critics provide well-founded and convincing analysis. However, their interpretations of the poem’s imagery remain bounded within the physical realm. The extreme

level of detail in Whitman's words is taken to be a vivid grand layout of real entities and physical objects to be assembled into an interpretation of a mystical experience. To illustrate this, one can explore interpretations of the theme of grass, which unites the poem between its fifty-two sections and with other poems from the collection *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman introduces the theme of grass with several lines: "This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers" (6.21). Hence, Goodblatt and Glicksohn take a metaphorical interpretation of grass, but one that is still rooted in physicality: they propose that grass is given a human quality in the form of hair. Miller is more explicit, borrowing upon the properties of literal grass – for instance, that it both represents new life and grows at the foot of graves – to bolster his argument on Whitman's view of life. In this stream of criticism, arguments employ either the properties of or other physical metaphors for the physical entities in "Song of Myself".

However, I propose interpretation less rooted in the physical world, beginning with grass as interconnected knowledge and story – small grasps of matter we grow, possess, and share, capable of rooting themselves anywhere. Story, as it is described, hence accumulates in the "white heads of old mothers" (6.21) and lurks in the "faint red roofs of mouths" (6.22), taken and given, listened to and spoken. Indeed, the symbol of grass is the "uniform hieroglyphic" (6.9), the common language that grows and develops everywhere. Whitman remarks that "there is really no death" (6.28): story breathes eternal life and immortality. While the approach of prior criticism treats the most functional scope of the poem to be at the level of the literal sensory description of an entity, this paper will attempt to explore "Song of Myself" on the level of story – the assemblage of descriptions into a moving, dynamic essence.

I argue that "Song of Myself" demonstrates how the body is directly connected to the soul through the medium of story. Whitman portrays that there is a certain inextricability

between the selves of any set of individuals: our self is the product of stories shaped and defined by senses. We all take from and give to humankind's shared pool of stories and experiences; thus, there is no story of self completely independent from another being. By illustrating the reciprocity and circular nature of speaking and listening, Whitman shows how our voice and the stories that comprise it are shaped by the voices of others. Moreover, "Song of Myself" demonstrates that this inextricable connectedness is freeing, rather than constricting, to one's freedom and expression of self.

Jerome Bruner articulates a theoretical lens useful in analyzing Whitman's work through this light in his essay "The Narrative Creation of Self", in which he argues that the notion of selfhood is not an independent entity, but instead one crafted by narratives heavily influenced by multiple strata of environment and culture. The act of constructing the master narrative of self – the "story of stories" – is one guided by implicit and explicit models of what it should or should not be. Attempting to establish an increased uniqueness, then, relies on a selective assemblage of experiences into our story of self in a way highly attentive to others' expectations and models. Hence, Bruner argues, constructing the notion of self brings us closer to others. While Bruner does not explicitly state his model of the creation of self as a *passing-down of stories* – only that the self is generated through story – it does not require a large paradigm shift in order to reframe Bruner's argument as such. If one's self is fueled is influenced by every other and one's self determines how one influences another, then naturally one's own "narrative creation" is a product of others' "narrative creations". Such a conclusion is the result of applying Bruner's more individual ideas about the creation of self to Whitman's universal scale. However, this difference in scales – between the individual and the universal – impacts the perspective from which both thinkers approach the notion of self as interconnected story. While Whitman portrays

this collective interconnectedness as sublime and freeing, Bruner renders it a complication to individual agency and freedom.

Diane Kepner's work offers a helpful bridge between the conversation on Whitman's engagement with mysticism that Goodblatt, Glicksohn, and Miller contribute to and Bruner's ideas of narrative creation. Kepner argues that Whitman's Theory of Nature is a reconciliation between a purely theological and a purely scientific view of nature, the body, and the soul. The former perspective celebrates only the soul and the spiritual, denying the body in order to focus on the soul as the truth of our being. The latter values only the body as carrying the basis for our existence; the atom, not a God that speaks and exists in our souls, is taken to be the fundamental unchanging constant of the universe. Kepner asserts that, by neither rejecting the existence of God nor the atom, Whitman intertwines the relationship between the body and the soul. Indeed, Whitman writes that "...the soul is not more than the body, / And ... the body is not more than the soul," (48.1-2), indicating that the soul is not some being entrenched irretrievably deep inside our external body nor an essence irrelevant in the face of materialist sensorium. The self and the body are each accessible to one another, influencing and drawing upon each other. This is the premise of Bruner's argument: his ideas are framed against earlier thought suggesting that self and body are disconnected. Establishing this inextricable link allows for the development of self as interconnected story – spoken and listened to, passed along.

To tell a story, one needs speech to begin with – the most original and natural method humans are endowed with to express their soul to the outside. Indeed, Whitman describes speech as a sense itself: "My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach, / With a swirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds. / Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself." (25.5-7). To speak is to understand and to reach deeper than sight – it is the

creation and realization of the soul. On a literal level, sight is perhaps the most informational of the senses; the explicit dimension, richness, and precision of data collected via seeing is unparalleled by the other four. The voice cannot speak the information seen by sight – hence, the often-repeated phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words”. However, despite a reduction in literal information quantity from sight to voice, it is speech that *assembles* the information, by necessity obscuring parts and highlighting others, to form a dynamic, linear story. Speech infuses a torrent of chaotic knowledge with the organized sense of the speaker. The voice hence grasps at the soul deeper and more coherently through the crafting of narrative. As such, Whitman echoes Bruner’s assertion that the instrument of narrative brings a society of story-crafters and storytellers closer, rather than farther apart. “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,” (1.6-7), Whitman writes. The tongue – the biological mechanism through which unique sounds can be formed and then strung into different words, sentences, and stories – is derived from the same world inhabited by all. Thus, despite all the individualities and differences expressed by different distortions and movements of the tongue, nevertheless the formation of the uniqueness in the speech that constructs self is itself held in common.

While the voice grasps most truly at the soul, one’s voice itself is an agglomeration of the voices of others. Walt Whitman dedicates a section – part 24 – to a discussion of the forces and elements that comprise and form himself. It is the voices of others that form the “Walt Whitman” entity. He describes that channeling through him runs “many long dumb voices” (24.13) and many “forbidden voices” (24.21). These voices are described as being the “Voices of... prisoners and slaves, / Voices of the diseas’d and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs” (24.25-26), each of which are involved in stories of their own in other sections of “Song of Myself”. In section 37,

the narrator laments his imprisonment in jail among other convicts. In section 10, a runaway slave arrives at the narrator's house; the narrator cares for him. In section 19, the thief is invited alongside the promiscuous diseased venerealee and the immoral sponger to a "meal equally set" (19.4), hosted by the narrator. The voices that come through him are those whom he has encountered and constructed a story; each of these voices, carrying their own stories, is assembled and narrated in sections of the poem that form his voice and self. This powers the theme of interconnectedness that undergirds "Song of Myself" – if each voice is molded and driven by many other voices, then through our voice runs all the voices of the world. Hence, "Whoever degrades another degrades me, / And whatever is done or said returns at last to me" (21.7). This bolsters Whitman's argument against the purely theological view of nature introduced by Kepner – the voices that run through one's soul are not only the holiest and most noble but also the many "dumb" and "forbidden" ones.

The transfer of narrative entities communicated through the medium of speech needs not only a voice but also an ear; it is listening that completes the circuit of story constructing and telling that connects every being. Whitman begins section 26 with the introduction "Now I will do nothing but listen, / To accrue what I hear into this song, to let sounds contribute toward it" (26.1-2). "This song" likely refers to the "Song of Myself"; thus, the introduction serves to inform that the following sounds described are listened to and accrued into the song – the story – of self. The following stanza outlines a chaotic cacophony of sounds: the "Sounds of the city" (26.6), "Talkative young ones" (26.7), "The angry base of disjointed friendship" (26.8), "The ring of alarm-bells" (26.11), among others. The dissonant sounds are described as morphing into music; the enamored young man's cries of despair become the violoncello, the scales of the cornet fill his ears. This transformation of disorder serves the purpose to illustrate the process of

story-making: listening to all that there is to listen, then compiling the torrent of chaotic information into a coherent, musical story – a voice. Listening, thus, is the process of voice-making. Finally, the narrator “hear[s] the chorus, it is a grand opera, / Ah this indeed is music – this suits me” (26.18-19). A chorus is a group of individual singers, yet each of their voices is sung in harmony with the rest, such that a listener cannot hear any one singer but instead the entire ensemble as mellifluous music. However, an opera cannot consist only of a chorus; soon, Whitman writes that “A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me, / The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full” (26.20-21); “I hear the train’d soprano... // It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possess’d them” (26.22-23). The primary singers of this opera, the tenor and the soprano, emerge in pleasant euphony with one another, more clearly and distinctly. It is the addition of these vibrant, clear voices, in the backdrop of the chorus, that forms the passionate expression of self; the individual dampens some voices and highlights others in the creation of their own voice to patterns produce a personal, moving music. The narrator’s listening becomes experiencing, then singing himself – his breath, his windpipe passionately releasing sound as well; his voice has been constructed. Moreover, the opera itself is a medium for dramatic story; the narrator’s orchestration is just as much a story as it is their voice. Whitman concludes this exploration into listening and voice-making with the final contented note, “And that is what we call Being” (26.28). Indeed, it is this opera – a careful arrangement of voices, sounds, experiences into a harmonious story – that becomes the essence of our self. It is finding this narrative and harmonious structure in a deluge of information from which our voice is constructed.

Bruner articulates a similar vision in the formation of the self; yet embedded in his piece is a certain pessimism surrounding the agency of the self. Bruner characterizes the establishment

of our uniqueness as a futile effort, with despairing language to match: we are “bound” to our inability to separate ourselves from others, memories become “victims” of our self-making stories, the expectations and implicit models of our environment are “mindlessly” picked up and adopted. The process of story-making, then – of listening to a stridency of sounds and orchestrating them to form the voice – is, to Bruner, a constraint, rather than gift, of life. Indeed, Bruner writes that “I hold the Western liberal view that inviolate selfhood is the base of human freedom” (339). Hence, Bruner writes that he considers his essay as a contribution to bringing awareness of what the “contending values are” (339) – that is, his ideas of human freedom are complicated by and even struggle against the narrative creation of self that he proposes.

On the other hand, an optimism infuses Whitman’s ideas on the construction one’s own story and self. The inability to establish oneself completely independently of another and the process of story making – a *reductive* rather than an *enlarging* operation in terms of literal information content – is, to Whitman, beautiful. Despite illustrating that the voices of others form our own voice, Whitman also puts forth a certain agency to construct the story of self. Kepner’s analysis that Whitman balances between a purely theological and scientific view of nature bolsters this assertion: the scientific does not dominate the theological, despite Whitman’s evident critique of the theological. In describing the orchestration of sounds in section 26, Whitman places heavy emphasis on the narrator: sounds are prefaced with “I hear” six times in the poem, but only before the beautiful ones – the “bravuras of birds” (26.3), “the sound I love, the sound of the human voice” (26.4), the violincello, the cornet, the chorus and the grand opera. The others – the judge reading the death sentence, the chaotic alarm bells – occur without any involvement of the narrator. In finally constructing the harmony of music from the assortment of sounds, the narrator sighs pleasantly: “Ah this indeed is music – this suit me” (26.19); thus, the

individual is heavily involved in the process of listening and constructing the story that becomes their voice and self. The individual's involvement in creating music harmonious to them, Whitman argues, is immensely valuable. Whitman's belief in a certain agency of self to construct story is exemplified well in an excerpt from section 2:

You shall possess the good of the earth and the sun, (there are millions of suns left),
 You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the
 dead, nor feed on the spectres in books.
 You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
 You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

A cursory reading would suggest that Whitman is in complete opposition to Bruner – the former argues for a complete unbiassing, a “filtering”, and the latter argues for the impossibility of such action. However, this seemingly stark difference lies truly in their respective optimism and pessimism in one's agency to construct stories, not a disagreement that such stories are inevitably the product of the stories of others. Whitman argues for a *greater connectivity*; that is, it is true that we are connected to every other entity through story, but not all entities are equally strongly connected. A powerful tale, after passing through several rounds of listening and speaking, can be dimmed, altered, changed. To embrace one's connectivity with all of the world, Whitman advocates for searching for the most direct story to strengthen the relationship between one and every entity. Thus, “Song of Myself” aids in a different understanding how human freedom is defined: Whitman proposes that engaging in pursuit of more active and wide connectivity is more freeing than remaining isolated in attempt to circumvent the reality of our interconnectedness.

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