

## 1855: A STOP-PRESS REVISION

GARY SCHMIDGALL

---

AS IS WELL KNOWN, Walt Whitman claimed to have been present at the printer's shop of the brothers Andrew and James Rome, at Cranberry and Fulton Streets in Brooklyn, when the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was set in type—and even to have set some type himself. Responding to a query from unidentified “Dear Sirs” in a letter dated March 31, 1885, Whitman stated: “The first *Leaves of Grass* was printed in 1855 in Brooklyn New York—Small quarto 9 by 12 inches, 95 pages—in the type called ‘English’—was not stereotyped—800 copies were struck off on a hand press by Andrew Rome, in whose office the work was all done—the author himself setting some of the type” (*Corr.* 6:30). A surviving invoice by the edition's Brooklyn binder, Charles Jenkins, corroborates this, giving a total of 795 copies in various bindings.<sup>1</sup>

Until now, no variants involving changed wording have been discovered among extant copies of the 1855 *Leaves* from the print run of 795 copies, though instances of discrepancies involving broken type have been noted. And Joel Myerson, in his *Walt Whitman: A Descriptive Bibliography*, did observe that, “due to mis-inking,” the pronoun “I” is missing in the tenth line on page 15 in some copies.<sup>2</sup> However, in the course of proof-reading for my St. Martin's Press edition, *Walt Whitman: Selected Poems 1855-1892* (1999), what I believe to be the first known substantial change in wording—and thus the first known revision from the thousands Whitman was to make in *Leaves of Grass* over the following thirty-seven years—came to light.

The St. Martin's Press proofreader worked from my Chandler Publishing Company 1968 paperback facsimile of a copy of the first edition in the Library of the University of California at Berkeley, and I checked the proofs against an original copy in the New York Public Library (NYPL). While comparing notes, we became aware of the following two versions of the second line on page 49 (i.e., line 1118 of the untitled poem beginning “I celebrate myself”—which was finally titled “Song of Myself”):

And the night is for you and me and all, [Berkeley copy]

And the day and night are for you and me and all, [NYPL copy]

Clearly, Whitman stopped the press and either ordered the change or made it himself. One reason the discrepancy may not have come to light hitherto is that Whitman suppressed the entire line after the third edition of *Leaves* (1860).

Several Whitman scholars have confirmed that this is a first discovery of its kind. The implications are significant, not least the likely confirmation of Whitman's personal presence during the printing process. This also raises a question about the collation, if any, of copies of the first edition by the editors of the variorum edition of *Leaves*.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, I am unaware of a complete census of extant copies of the 1855 edition.

Curious about the state of other copies, I found that all of the nearly dozen 1855 *Leaves* in the New York Public Library's Oscar Lion and Berg Collections contain the longer line. The 1939 Facsimile Text Society edition and the 1992 Collectors Reprints facsimile were based on NYPL copies, and the 1966 Eakins Press facsimile—reproduced from a copy in Yale University's Beinecke Library—also has the longer version.<sup>4</sup> Of the three copies in the Columbia University Rare Books collection, one (the Lamont copy) has the shorter line, the other two the longer. The Huntington Library is fortunate to have both versions represented in its two copies. (A Huntington curator, Alan Jutzi, was especially delighted to learn of the discovery because it constituted an argument for not deaccessioning redundant copies of important titles.) The Library of America edition, incidentally, offers the shorter line, while the *Variorum* records only the longer line, as does Malcolm Cowley's familiar edition of the 1855 *Leaves* and as does Emory Holloway's early "variorum" edition.<sup>5</sup>

The predominance of copies with the longer line suggests that, earlier rather than later in the print run, work was stopped and the shorter line was replaced. Whitman pared down the longer line to "Day and night are for you, me, all," for the 1856 edition, and it appeared as such in the 1860 edition. In his personal copy of that edition, in pencil, Whitman first considered adding "And that" to the beginning of the line. But then he crossed out the entire line, and it indeed vanished from all subsequent editions.<sup>6</sup>

In my introduction to the St. Martin's edition, I assert my conviction that Whitman's substantial revisions are typically *not* improvements. In this view I find myself in the excellent company of the poet's devoted friends Anne Gilchrist, Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, and William O'Connor. They loudly decried Whitman's tendency to revise, and a case could be made against this seemingly innocuous first change. For if, by respectably adding "day" to the line, Whitman denatured in a fleeting way his boast elsewhere of being a "disorderly," "sensual," and "rough" poet/companion of the night, then this first known revision in the printed version of his *chef d'oeuvre* could be accounted contrary to the overwhelmingly subversive thrust of "Song of Myself"—and there-

fore unfortunate. It would by no means be the last time Whitman was, to borrow a phrase of his own, stung by the respectability bee.

Then again, Whitman may have felt, much earlier in the poem, he had made his credentials as a denizen of night-town Mannahatta sufficiently clear with these lines: "Press close barebosomed night! Press close magnetic nourishing night! . . . Mad naked summer night!"

*City University of New York*

## NOTES

- 1 See William White, "The First (1855) 'Leaves of Grass': How Many Copies?," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 57 (1963), 352-354.
- 2 *Walt Whitman: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), 19-20.
- 3 Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, Arthur Golden, and William White, eds., *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, 3 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1980).
- 4 New York: Columbia University Press for Facsimile Text Society, 1939; New York: Collectors Reprints, 1992; New York: Eakins Press, 1966.
- 5 Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1982), 78; *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking, 1961), 76; *Variorum*, 70; *Leaves of Grass: Inclusive Edition*, ed. Emory Holloway (Garden City: Doubleday, 1926), 570.
- 6 See Arthur Golden, ed., *Walt Whitman's Blue Book* (New York: New York Public Library, 1968), 1:92; *Variorum*, 70.