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With the notable exception of “O Captain! My Captain!,” the crowd pleaser with which he concluded his annual Lincoln lecture, Walt Whitman seldom recited his poetry aloud. He enjoyed declaiming other poets--as a young man, he walked the beaches of Long Island shouting passages from Homer, Ossian, and Shakespeare to the waves--but he never bothered to memorize his own verse, and he was generally reluctant to read from *Leaves of Grass*. When a newspaper report of his encounter with Sir Edwin Arnold claimed that Whitman recited passages from the *Leaves* for his distinguished visitor, the poet was indignant: “I don’t recite [my own poems] because I don’t know them. *Could not recite.*”¹

Yet for all his indifference to public performance of his poetry, Whitman was intensely interested in oratory and the voice. “It has always been one of my chosen delights, from earliest boyhood up, to follow the flights . . . of American oratory,” he told Horace Traubel.² Faced with poor sales of the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass*, he announced to a friend that he had determined to become “a public Speaker,” taking his message directly to the people. “Whether it will come to any thing, remains to be seen,” he added dubiously.³ His soft, high-pitched voice was not suited to the unamplified conditions of nineteenth-century oratory, and audiences at his Lincoln lectures and infrequent public readings complained that the poet was inaudible beyond the first few rows.

Still, audible or not, Whitman loved the human voice. “Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice,” he writes in “Song of Myself,” a poem full of oratorical flourishes and of depictions of oratory:

A call in the midst of the crowd,
My own voice, orotund sweeping and final.

Come my children,
Come my boys and girls, my women, household and intimates,
Now the performer launches his nerve, he has pass’d his prelude on the reeds
within.⁴

The poem seems to call for oral performance, and Whitman confirmed that “*Song of Myself*,” like all his poems, was composed on the tongue. “I like to read them in a palpable voice,” he told Traubel. “I try my poems that way--always have: read them aloud to myself.”⁵

It is appropriate, then, that public readings of “*Song of Myself*” are becoming increasingly common, rivaling the annual Bloomsday readings of *Ulysses*. Unlike readings of *Ulysses*, daylong events that require scores of participants, “*Song of Myself*” can be read aloud in under two hours and requires, at most, fifty-two readers, one for each of its sections.

For the past three years, we have organized annual readings of “*Song of Myself*” at The College of New Jersey. Originally, we held the events at the end of the fall semester, as the culmination of a Walt Whitman seminar. This fall, the reading opened a three-day Whitman symposium in late September, and the promise of gentle autumn weather led us to hold the event under a canopy pitched on the college’s main lawn--a particularly appropriate venue for a poet who instructs us to “read these leaves in the open air.”⁶ From the beginning, the readings have involved diverse participants: students in our classes, other English majors, professors, deans, even the college president, a former English professor who happily claimed section 6, the passage beginning, “A child said *What is the grass?*” The relocation to an outdoor pavilion in the center of campus enabled us to draw an even greater range of participants, as curious passers-by paused to listen and were invited to sign up for a section.

As an aid to anyone interested in staging a reading of “*Song of Myself*,” we have included below the sign-up sheet we use. This model is for a reading beginning at noon but can

be adjusted to suit different starting times. The time allowed for each section has been honed over three years, although of course it is wise to warn participants to arrive early and not to be surprised should they begin behind schedule. Signing up participants in advance, we circulate the schedule on regular 8 1/2 x 11 paper. For the day of the event we enlarge the sign-up sheets, mount them on poster board, and display them on an easel so that passers-by can sign up for unclaimed sections. Despite our admiration for the 1855 edition of "*Song of Myself*," we use the deathbed edition, which is much more widely available and handily divided into sections.

"I seem to get a new angle on [my poems when I] read them aloud," Whitman told Traubel. "[I] see things I could not see in any other way."⁷ We find the same to be true each time we hear "*Song of Myself*" read aloud. Readers find humor in passages we never realized were funny; they bring out the pathos of the "mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken," the "hounded slave . . . winc[ing] at the bite of the dogs."⁸ Each time, we appreciate the varied carols sung by a diverse group of Americans as they move through this great, strange masterpiece. And as participants ourselves, we experience for a moment the joys that Walt Whitman, connoisseur of oratory, found in the spoken voice:

O the orator's joys!
To inflate the chest, to roll the thunder of the voice out from the ribs and throats,
To make people rage, weep, hate, desire, with yourself,
To lead America--to quell America with a great tongue.⁹

**WALT WHITMAN’S “SONG OF MYSELF”
MARATHON READING**

<u>Section</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>E-Mail</u>
1	12:00		
2	12:01		
3	12:04		
4	12:07		
5	12:08		
6	12:10		
7	12:12		
8	12:13		
9	12:15		
10	12:16		
11	12:18		
12	12:19		
13	12:20		
14	12:21		
15	12:22		
16	12:29		
17	12:31		
18	12:32		
19	12:33		
20	12:34		
21	12:36		
22	12:38		
23	12:41		
24	12:43		
25	12:48		
26	12:50		
27	12:52		

28	12:54		
29	12:55		
30	12:56		
31	12:57		
32	12:59		
33	1:01		
34	1:16		
35	1:18		
36	1:21		
37	1:22		
38	1:23		
39	1:24		
40	1:25		
41	1:27		
42	1:29		
43	1:32		
44	1:35		
45	1:38		
46	1:41		
47	1:43		
48	1:46		
49	1:48		
50	1:50		
51	1:51		
52	1:52		

Notes

¹ Horace Taubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* [WWC], 9 vols., various publishers, 1906-1996, 9:124.

² WWC 6:457. David Reynolds discusses Whitman’s interest in oratory in *Walt Whitman’s America* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 166-75.

³ Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: NYU Press, 1961), 1:45.

⁴ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader’s Edition [LG], ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: NYU Press, 1965), 33, 76.

⁵ WWC 3:375.

⁶ “Preface 1855,” LG 715.

⁷ WWC 3:375.

⁸ LG 67, 66.

⁹ “A Song of Joys,” LG 181.

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