Proofs of Genius

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The first collected edition of Walt Whitman’s writings that readers today would recognize as such was the 1902 *Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, published by his executors a decade after his death. But Whitman, whose poetic career spanned the latter half of the nineteenth century and who, as a former newspaperman and printer, brought an unusual bookman’s sensibility to his poetical project, had a more complex relationship to the phenomenon of collected editions than the date of that posthumous collection might suggest. After the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, collection became one of the recurring strategies of his career, as he folded more and more into his major book of poetry, bound matching companion volumes, and eventually designed his own collected works. As a skilled self-promoter and as a poet who held ambitions to become the nation’s poetic voice, Whitman was well aware of how the right positioning within the literary marketplace could bolster the reputations of authors. He and his literary executors viewed author-centric collections as an important way to survey poetic accomplishment and assert posthumous reputation. Whitman’s own efforts to control his literary legacy offer a case study in how the late nineteenth-century collected edition mirrored other death customs as a way of marking a dead poet’s cultural prominence.

Whitman’s attitudes toward his legacy were complex, and it is possible to distinguish in his career two conflicting visions of how he wanted posterity to behold him. In each case, he anticipated a treatment of his corpse that would correspond to a particular literary afterlife. As was the case with many nineteenth-century authors, the corpse and the corpus were intertwined, each offering the author and his public a way to formalize the end of his life and career, to consecrate a specific site for public mourning, and
to confirm the nature of his legacy as the life and works were together ushered into the larger culture. This chapter describes how Whitman variously projected two outcomes for the treatment of his body after death: one in which he was simply returned to the earth to become grass, and one in which his body, elevated from the earth, would be enshrined in the artifice of a tomb. Whitman, and later his disciples, viewed these alternatives as intimately bound to different textual afterlives for Whitman—the organic, unorthodox *Leaves of Grass* and the conventional textual monument of the *Complete Writings*.

1. “LOOK FOR ME UNDER YOUR BOOTSOLES”

![Fig. 3. Whitman's typographical design for the cover of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*.](image)

Grass was a central image in Whitman's poetics, so much so that it provides the title of his major work, and by the 1891 edition, the word “grass” appeared sixty-eight times in the body of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's view of grass has been variously explained as representing his views of democracy, equality, and resurrection. Ed Folsom reminds us that grass for Whitman was not the homogenous, uniformly cut, tame grass of modern lawns, but the wild, diverse, brambly shoots of the prairie, just as he pictured in his design for the cover of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (fig. 3). Jerome Loving points out that grass—like so much about Whitman's poetics—can be traced back to his bedrock identity as a printer. The term “grass” would have been familiar to him as a trade term for “compositions of dubious value.” Whitman certainly seems to have picked “leaves” for its double meaning as a bibliographic term, eschewing the martial connotations of the more conventional “spears” and “blades.”
In his influential 1962 critical study of Whitman, James E. Miller Jr. discusses grass as one of the most important recurring images in Whitman’s writing, “the one single symbol that concentrated in itself the suggestion of the poet’s many meanings,” in particular his “central concept of democracy—individuality in balance with the mass,” and also “the miracle of the universe.” For Miller, “the leaf of grass has no limits in its symbolic meaning—it means everything, all, the total.”

Many critics look at section 6 of “Song of Myself,” his most extended meditation on grass, for Whitman’s explanation of its significance. In it, he attempts to define “grass” for an inquisitive child. The section is complex and important enough to quote in full:

A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon
out of their mothers’ laps,
And here you are the mothers’ laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for
nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and
women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken
soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the
end to arrest it,
And ceas’d the moment life appear’d.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.⁴

This section is often read as Whitman vacillating, as expressing his uncer-
tainty about the symbolic power of grass.⁵ But section 6 indicates more cer-
tainty than that. Whitman begins the section from a position of strategic
naïveté, claiming not to know more about the grass than a child does, be-
fore offering several guesses, each of which is introduced as such. “I guess,”
“Or I guess” he writes four times, then posits an explanation for what the
grass “seems” to be—“the beautiful uncut hair of graves”—before realizing
that it isn’t the hair of graves but the tongues: “O, I perceive after all so
many uttering tongues.” After all the other guesses, he has homed in on the
meaning of grass, and he finds it to be the enigmatically speaking mouths of the dead—a meaning that is more synecdochal or metonymic than metaphorical for Whitman, because for him, the grass is literally the transmuted mouths of the dead, and not simply a representation of them. The image of grass as tongues of the dead was so resonant to Whitman that he repeats it in section 49: “I hear you whispering . . . O grass of graves . . . If you do not say anything how can I say anything?” Finally, he selects this image for the concluding lines of “Song of Myself”:

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another;  
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

Those seeking Whitman after his death should look for him in the grass, where he will be enigmatic and elusive but real. When folded into the dirt, Whitman anticipates his body transmuted and dispersed into grass, where he will still “mean.” The grass is the transformed voices of the dead; when Whitman dies we can find his voice there, too, however difficult to decipher.

Whitman may become the grass, but he also tells us he would become his book. In the last poem of the final edition of Leaves of Grass, “So Long!,” Whitman anticipates his death and begins the poem by declaring that he will “announce what comes after me.” He writes:

Camerado, this is no book,  
Who touches this touches a man,  

It is I you hold and who holds you,  
I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth.

“Decease calls me forth”: It is death that summons Whitman, the book that he has become. And the book, of course, is also grass, Leaves of Grass. Whit-
man establishes a metonymic triangle in which he is both the grass and his book; and the book is also grass, both in its title and in the way that it becomes his voice after death. The fate of Whitman after death is a sort of trinity, in which he becomes leaves of grass and *Leaves of Grass*.

Embedded in the title *Leaves of Grass* is not simply the dense image of grass, but also that term, “leaves”—a popular pun that appeared in at least seventy American titles in the decade preceding Whitman’s use—which seems unusual in referring to grass blades and connotes more than the second meaning of “pages.” “Leave” also means *permitted absence*—a soldier on leave, for instance—and in this sense was often written and spoken as “leaf” in the mid-nineteenth century. Additionally, “leave” means to cause something to remain, to leave behind, and in the specific context of death and dying, *to leave* means both to be survived by loved ones and to transmit property for distribution: one might leave a widow or leave a fortune.

Reading “leaves” in *Leaves of Grass* as meaning absences or remainders does not seem to be recommended by the grammatical construction, but Whitman toyed with similar multiple entendres in other contexts in which grammatical orthodoxy took a backseat to useful ambiguity, such as in the section of correspondence and criticism in the 1856 *Leaves of Grass* titled “Leaves-Droppings.” The more grammatically correct construction would have been “Leaf-Droppings,” but Whitman wanted it to echo the book title and the word “eavesdropping.” Similarly, “Leaves of Grass” offers a reading, not simply of spears or pages, but also of permitted absences, remainders, and inheritances of grass, which underline his concluding claim in “Song of Myself” that in death he will “bequeath” himself to the dirt “to grow from the grass.” *Leaves of Grass* and leaves of grass are where Whitman goes and what he leaves as his legacy.

Over the course of his poetic career, *Leaves of Grass* became Whitman’s autocollection, the ongoing container, sometimes marketed with a companion volume, for those works that he wanted to be part of himself and that he wanted to speak for him during life and after death. At various times he published significant stand-alone works, such as *Drum-Taps* and *Passage to India*, which he saw as coherent independent texts that he wanted to be received as such, but eventually he wrested them back into *Leaves of Grass*, his idiosyncratic collected edition, sometimes by brute force, as with his binding of copies of *Drum-Taps* into the 1867 *Leaves*. Separately printed and paginated, their inclusion was a bit Frankensteinian, but Whitman wanted the pieces that he viewed as significant, as part of him, brought into the collection.
2. THE COMPLETE POEMS AND PROSE, AN ALTERNATIVE TO LEAVES OF GRASS

A reader of Whitman would have been justified in assuming that the poet intended a simple burial for himself—that he who bequeathed himself to the dirt, who marveled at the miraculous chemistry of the earth, at its ability, as he describes in “This Compost,” to turn the “sour dead” into “such sweet things”—would have avoided the pomp and artifice of conventional burial and its attempts to stave off the very transformative miracles Whitman celebrated by sealing off the body from earth's alchemy. As Whitman aged, though, he became more conventional in many ways, and his attitude toward his own burial seemed to be one of them, though I will argue that Whitman's apparent hypocrisy toward burial arrangements in his final years may have been more complex and strategic than it seemed. In the last five years of his life, as his health was failing and death seemed almost constantly upon him, Whitman set out to construct dual everlasting monuments for himself, one textual and one sepulchral. His status as a major poet would be secured by following the same steps that other American poets took to ensure their posthumous reputations: a supervised collected edition, a cemetery monument, and later, a more expansive collected edition created by others.

Whitman began planning his textual monument before a cemetery monument was a real possibility. A few years before his death, he began to feel a pressing need to enshrine his works in a more conventional textual monument than Leaves of Grass. By the late 1880s, an aging generation of American poets had begun to put their literary houses in order. Lowell (1877–1880), Longfellow (1879), Whittier (1884), and Holmes (1892) had all overseen collections of their works in their old age, in some cases identifying biographers to help ensure that their lives and works would be collected and presented to their satisfaction. These literary last wills and testaments gave authors an opportunity to gather and survey their own literary property and to attempt to exert some posthumous control over their intellectual estates.

In 1888, Whitman was in such bad shape that he and his friends believed he was near death. His contemporaries’ method of shoring up their legacies started to appeal to him, and by summer he had decided it was crucial for him to create a conventional collected edition before his death. He chose the publisher and printer who were bringing out his November Boughs, mostly because they would allow Whitman to closely supervise the production of the book. Despite numerous health setbacks, Whitman focused his limited
energies on the book. He said that summer, “I am in a hurry—in a hurry. I want to see the book in plates: then I can die satisfied.”

At least at times, as he worked, Whitman seemed to believe that the *Complete Poems and Prose* would supersede *Leaves of Grass*. He explained that it had always been his intention to collect his writings in one place, and as the work progressed Whitman and his quasi-religious followers increasingly seemed to see the collected edition as not only the culmination of Whitman’s career, but also a culmination of American literature. “Guess it will be the sacred text by and bye. The first folio of S. [Shakespeare] is valuable but I guess after a little that the autograph C.W. of W.W. will lead it in the market,” he joked to his follower, Horace Traubel, though the humor was only in acknowledging his earnestly held aspirations. He became very concerned about the quality of paper and binding—he did not have unlimited funding for the edition, but he wanted to make sure the book’s quality would allow it to last as a monument to him. Decent paper and sturdy binding were the granite for this textual monument. As preparation continued, his acolytes talked about the book without even Whitman’s scant modesty. “It will be a standard book for many a day,” Maurice Bucke explained. “To many and many it will be sacred, an altogether priceless volume—a bible of the bibles—a resumé of them all.” When the book was released, Bucke sent Whitman a letter exclaiming that it was “the first of its kind”—though, as a collection of an author’s intellectual output, it certainly was not—and that it was “a volume of the future for the next thousand years.” Whitman was so taken with Bucke’s description that he duplicated the letter and distributed it with copies of the book.

Whitman’s view of the book had always been that it would encompass him. “Take me as I am: my bad and my good, my everything—just as I am: to hell with all cuts, all excisions, all moralistic abridgements,” he said to Traubel. He seemed to view it much the way he had historically viewed *Leaves of Grass*, only with a title that would be more readily understood as a collection. In fact, Whitman initially intended to call the volume *Walt Whitman Complete*, emphasizing the metonymy of book and man, until he and Traubel realized that the title, which would be written above a picture of only Whitman’s head, would be the object of mockery.

*Complete Poems and Prose* is a curious book, especially given that within a few years Whitman would add so much of its content to the deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, apparently, at the end, wanting his more idiosyncratic autobiography to also stand as a broad record of his life’s writings.
However, Whitman positioned himself and his writing in a subtly but distinctly different way in the *Complete Poems and Prose*. He included several chronologically arranged “portraits from life” and an autograph, making the book visually connected to his body, and *Specimen Days*, a collection of reminiscences, also added a significant autobiographical dimension to the book. “The book is probably a sort of autobiography,” he explains in the “Note at End.” Of the photos and autograph, he writes, “I have wanted to leave something markedly personal” and described himself as “bequeathing” them to the reader, emphasizing the role of the collection as a literary will. These comments, taken alone, seem to make *Complete Poems and Prose* a record of personal achievement, but Whitman’s concluding remarks also clearly framed Whitman’s “complete” oeuvre as a public text. He explains:

The interrogative wonder-fancy rises in me whether my current time, 1855–1888, with their aggregate of our New World doings and people, have not, indeed, created and formulated the foregoing leaves—forcing their utterance as the pages of those years, and not from any individual epic or lyrical attempts whatever, or from my pen or voice, or any body’s special voice. . . . the book might assume to be consider’d an autochthonic record and expression, freely render’d . . . of the soul and evolution of America.

With these comments Whitman casts himself—not for the first time—as an American prophet who channeled the spirit of the nation into his books. The book is a chronicle of his own life and writings, which he bequeaths to us, but it is also a record of the age that America wrote itself. These seemingly irreconcilable views reflect how monuments often work, combining an homage to or the remains of a private individual with a site for commemorating what he represents to the larger community. Later, Whitman would construct another such monument for himself, this time out of granite.

3. **“THIS GRANITE, DEAD AND COLD”**

In December 1889, the manager of Harleigh Cemetery—at the time a pastoral cemetery outside of Camden and in sight of Philadelphia—approached Whitman with the offer of a free plot. The Reinhalter Brothers, monument builders from Philadelphia, offered to make Whitman a mausoleum at cost, hoping to earn publicity. The cemetery had opened just four years earlier,
and housing a stately memorial for a famous poet would bolster its reputation. Whitman found the offer quite seductive, and without consulting his friends, including the lawyer Thomas Harned, who regularly attended to Whitman and assisted him in legal matters, he signed a contract to allow Reinhalter Brothers to build the tomb at Harleigh and committing him to paying the cost, which was left unspecified at the time of signing. Twenty

Whitman seemed to feel as flattered by this monument as he had been toward other shows of conventional public adoration during his life—the tomb proved to be one of the occasions that evidenced Whitman’s desire for public acclaim and acceptance, for signs that the country he loved and sang had accepted him as its voice. This was a sensitive topic in the final decade of Whitman's life, and he often cast himself as more reviled, misunderstood, and conventionally unsuccessful than he really was, finding it easier to consider himself a man ahead of his time than one who had achieved fair but not resounding public success.

Eventually, Whitman’s plans went awry—as work progressed on the tomb, Whitman paid the bills in dribs and drabs (sometimes in amounts as low as $0.40), but was eventually presented with a horrifying bill of $4,678, which far exceeded his estimate of what the tomb would cost. Ralph Moore, the cemetery manager, presented Whitman with the contract he had signed, but in the interim someone had inserted the specific amount, a forgery that Whitman and his companions viewed as outrageous and as enough to release Whitman from the contract. However, an independent appraiser estimated the cost of the tomb as far higher than the bill presented to Whitman, and so Whitman’s friends acknowledged that Whitman was on the hook for the bill.

This conclusion was not only embarrassing to Whitman, who had begun to feel like a doddering fool over the whole episode, but also disastrous for Whitman’s brother, Eddy, who was physically and mentally disabled and whose care would be dependent on whatever funds Whitman would leave him. The bill would wipe out vulnerable Eddy’s inheritance, and Whitman was beside himself about it, but unwilling to allow his friends to take up contributions on his behalf. Whitman’s friends knew that Eddy’s fate depended on others paying Whitman’s debt. At one point Traubel felt out the wealthy George William Childs, a publisher of the Philadelphia Ledger who had previously donated money to Whitman. Childs told Traubel he would be happy to help Whitman out of the mess, but that they should settle it before Whitman’s death because potential donors would be far more likely
to support the tomb than to support Whitman's brother after he was gone: "Whitman has lots of admirers who would do anything for him but nothing for his family—wouldn’t give them ten cents." Finally, Whitman's friend and lawyer Harned settled the bill through some combination of his own money and funds donated to Whitman, possibly from solicitations he made without Whitman's knowledge. The disciples agreed to be vague with Whitman about how this happened, and Whitman seemed happy to accept the matter as closed without asking questions.

Whitman narrowly avoided financial disaster for a tomb that seemed utterly out of character to onlookers. He tried to justify the tomb by claiming it was really for his family—the tomb could hold six bodies in two rows of three, and he wanted to be between his mother and father. However, this motive never seemed fully explanatory, despite the fact that his defenders frequently used it to excuse what would otherwise seem a luxurious excess. Two weeks after agreeing to the tomb he told Traubel he was still debating whether to put his parents in it. Later, Whitman thought it would be difficult to even locate his father’s body with any certainty. He explained that he wanted the other crypts—which would eventually hold Eddy, his brother George, and George's wife and infant son—to hold his children. As the tomb fiasco came to a head, he claimed to Traubel and Harned that he had five children (to other people he had claimed six), two of whom were dead, and that he wanted them moved to the tomb. Whitman vacillated about these children—who were expedient fantasies—at first wanting them moved, then not, then wanting them again, and for some time he led Harned, “who was much stirred up by the children,” to believe he would make a legal statement regarding them. Harned seemed moved by this explanation for the tomb, and several times pressed Whitman to give him more information about his children, eventually concluding, “Whitman will take the story to the grave.” Whitman’s purported reasons seem dubious given that he actually had no children to put in it, his father’s body may not have been properly identified, and his mother’s dying wish had been for Whitman to provide for Eddy’s care. The tomb so flew in the face of common sense—Traubel called it “irrational”—and clashed with Whitman’s long-professed ideas about death and burial that it seems other ideas must have motivated him.

Harleigh Cemetery surely appealed to Whitman as part of the larger nineteenth-century movement in which cities began burying their dead in landscaped, idyllic parks outside the city proper. Rural cemeteries allowed
for both romanticized views of these “necropoli,” where the dead seemed to eternally rest in a beautified natural setting, as opposed to teeming urban graveyards, and of cities themselves, allowing cemetery visitors to reflect on urban life by looking at the distant, quiet skyline from the serene vantage point of the dead. Whitman appreciated Harleigh’s removed location and its tasteful, naturalistic landscaping. He visited the tomb construction site as frequently as his poor health allowed, turning each visit into a country day trip with his friends and caretakers. The cemetery’s landscape provided Whitman with enough natural beauty that he could justify his entombment as fitting his career-long positions on death, nature, and transformation.

The larger purpose behind Whitman’s interest in the tomb, though, was an end-of-life attempt to shore up his legacy. The first generation of American poets to solidify the nation’s literary identity, including three of whom Whitman referred to as “the mighty four,” had begun to die off as Whitman’s own aging body declined: Bryant in 1878, Emerson and Longfellow in 1882, then Lowell later in 1891. Each of these poets, held in varying degrees of respect by Whitman, were buried in a way that asserted their literary stature. Bryant was honored with an impressive obelisk in Roslyn Cemetery in Long Island, New York; Emerson was buried under a white, naturalistic boulder; Longfellow and Lowell were laid to rest in the prestigious Mt. Auburn Cemetery, one of the oldest and most iconic rural cemeteries in the country. Whitman was interested in the posthumous treatment prominent Americans received, and was fascinated if not repulsed by the desecration of Emerson’s grave and the grave of Quaker abolitionist Elias Hicks, each committed by perpetrators who seemed motivated more by adoration than by profit. Whitman felt ambivalence toward his more popular contemporaries, sometimes praising them, sometimes lamenting the “fatal defects of our American singers.” Despite his admiration for Emerson and Bryant especially, Whitman also resented poets whom he saw as failing to answer America’s need for a distinct literature while enjoying the praise of the people, praise he never felt he adequately received. Longfellow “never broke new paths,” he told Traubel, but “perhaps will always have some vogue among average readers of English.” In his waning years, as Whitman himself became increasingly conservative, he saw these lesser poets honored with memorial sites, which, by Whitman’s final years, blended natural beauty with shrines for public recognition, which must have resonated with the aging “American bard” who saw his “voice bringing hope and prophecy to the generous races of young and old.”
The tomb was not just a tomb to Whitman. From the beginning this place where his body would be housed after death was enmeshed with the book where his words would be housed after death. The tomb was more than a tomb; Whitman approached it as an extension of his textual self. To position himself in the American poetic pantheon, two complementary memorials would be erected—the tomb and the Complete Poems and Prose, the first presenting the body for public reverence, the second presenting his oeuvre for public reverence, each offering evidence of Whitman's cultural worth. The tomb and the Complete Poems and Prose offered an alternative track for Whitman's legacy, a more public, prominent, conventional way for his body and his body of work to live on in the public consciousness than the more organic and idiosyncratic option offered by grass and Leaves of Grass.

In her study of Victorian poets’ graves and literary remains, Samantha Matthews argues that nineteenth-century poets’ graves and works were intimately connected in the public imagination, leading readers to the physical remains and vice versa, the book and the tomb becoming dual sites of reverence. Sometimes reverence became so piqued it turned violatory. One defender of Whitman’s tomb thought the granite encasements were Whitman’s rational safeguard against the “repeated tomb robberies that so disgrace this country.” Indeed, Whitman had his share of followers who were interested in relics related to his death: he was tickled to hear of admirers who came to watch the construction of the tomb and of visitors who left with pieces of the chipped granite as souvenirs. Immediately after his death, Whitman’s close friends—despite their general lack of orthodoxy—shared the contemporary interest in the body at the moment of death, as well as the nineteenth-century fascination with the physiognomy of genius, and they made plaster casts of his face and hands, and sent his brain to the American Anthropometric Society for measurement (where it was accidentally destroyed).

Of course, Whitman could have avoided all of this fetishizing by arranging for his body to be disposed of in the manner he endorsed in Leaves of Grass. The apparent hypocrisy was not lost on some of his readers. Charlotte Porter, writing anonymously for the Boston Evening Transcript, called the “posthumous glory of marble” an “inappropriate” burial for a poet who held the “pantheistic thought of a restoration to the bosom of nature”:

And why a tomb? Had not Walt Whitman, of all men, earned the sanctity of a burial beneath the sod of the earth? Tombs and catacombs were for those
who awaited the transfer of their earthly bodies to a material heaven in the skies. . . . Every word of the philosophy of his poetry about death is a rejoicing in it as a reunion of the body with the elements which nourished it.30

Whitman’s defenders, though, understood the connection between the tomb and his works, and the importance of a public memorial for ensuring his legacy. William Sloane Kennedy, responding to Porter’s criticism, wrote:

What are a man’s writings but a monument to his memory, which he toils all his life to erect? Whitman knew well that the nation that had rejected his great gospel would erect no monument to him, and he knew well that five hundred years or a thousand years from now his grave would be the shrine of pilgrims from every land of the globe. He did right, then, in marking the spot, and our posterity will owe him thanks.31

Kennedy is careful to point out that the tomb was Whitman’s idea, not the imposition of friends who failed to grasp his philosophy, and that “rural Harleigh” is “in the woods and nowhere else,” his tomb specifically “in the out skirts of an almost empty cemetery in a grove, and abutting on vast fields which will always remain so.”

For his design of the controversial tomb, Whitman drew inspiration from a poet as interested in the visual aspects of bookmaking as he was, William Blake. Whitman sketched the tomb, then after Reinhalter brought him the plans, he reported to Bucke that he had seen the “design for the Cemetery vault (do you remember Blake’s ‘Death’?).”32 Blake has no work called simply “Death,” but Whitman was likely referring to an illustration that Blake repurposed for several contexts, including for Robert Blair’s *The Grave* (fig. 4), which has been understood as Whitman’s inspiration for the design.33 Blake’s illustration for this poem shows a figure gazing heavenward on top of the grave, which did not appear in Whitman’s design. But Blake used almost the same illustration in other contexts: in *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* (1793), where the top figure is missing, and in *America, A Prophecy* (1793) (fig. 5), where the top figure is also missing, and where the tomb is nestled in a hillside with a tree on top, making this illustration much closer to Whitman’s design and lending it additional significance as stemming from Blake’s poem about the American spirit of resistance. Though we cannot be certain which illustration inspired Whitman, it seems that the illustration from *America* is more similar to Whitman’s plans and comes from a text that would have been meaningful to him.
Whitman gave the tomb a title, *Beth*, telling Traubel it means “the unseen, the way up, mystery,” though of course “beth” literally means “house” and provides the latter half of “alphabet,” coloring Whitman’s house for his body with an etymological nod to textuality. “Walt Whitman’s Burial Vault” he jotted, as if he were writing advertising copy. In the sketch (fig. 6) Whitman called on the allure of the rural cemetery and Blake’s illustration: “on a sloping wooded hill vault heavy undressed” and “surroundings tree, turf sky a hill, everything crude & natural.” As work began on the tomb, Whitman supervised its construction as much as his limited mobility allowed,
Fig. 5. William Blake, engraving from *America* (1793).
involving himself the way he did when he supervised the printing of his books. As work progressed on the front of the tomb, Whitman intervened when engravers added a construction date under his name—Walt Whitman 1891—explaining that “my printer’s eye seems offended.”

When the tomb was completed and the payment imbroglio was heating up, Whitman began thinking about marketing the tomb, much in the way he orchestrated promotion of his books. He sought out two photographers to take pictures of the tomb under his direction, wanting them to capture “all that goes with it—air, trees, a bit of sky, the hill.” Eventually, he selected

![Fig. 6. Whitman’s tomb design (Library of Congress).](image-url)
one of the photographs to reproduce for distribution—a circular picture of the tomb in the middle of a card with specific instructions for layout and printing.

However, as Whitman neared death, he seemed to grow more ambivalent about the tomb. He avoided conversation about it, once changing the subject when William Douglas O’Connor’s wife questioned the reasoning behind it, saying “More and more as I grow old do I love the grass. It seems to supply me something—some dear, dear something—much my need, yes, greatly needed.” Eventually, Traubel reported, Whitman stopped speaking about the tomb, “conscious, in a way, that his friends suspect its consistency and wisdom,” though he protested once to Traubel, “it will justify itself—the tomb is one of the institutions of this earth; little by little reason will eke out. Yes, it is ‘for reasons.’”

In Whitman’s final years he showed some interest in the tomb as an “institution,” writing two poems in 1885 about the deaths and burials of American political heroes. In “Ah, Not this Granite, Dead and Cold,” a brief meditation on Washington’s life, he begins at the monument, “from its base and shaft expanding,” looking outward to all the places in the world “Wherever Freedom, poised by Toleration, swayed by Law, Stands or is rising thy true monument.” The dead, cold, granite monument is but a marker, inadequately encapsulating Washington’s significance but directing Whitman’s mind outward to his influence. In “As One by One Withdraw the Lofty Actors,” Whitman sees the political heroes of his age as actors “receding” “in countless graves,” much as Blake’s old man seems to retreat to the tomb. He concludes by encouraging their “hero heart” to persist through the ages, and directing the grave to “wait long and long.” These poems capture Whitman’s ambivalence toward graves in his final years, seeing the living world as the true measure of a figure’s legacy, but using the burial site as a point of departure for meditating upon their worth.

Whitman’s tomb was contradictory to many of the ideas set forth in his poetry, but as he insisted, it had its reasons—the tomb was key to establishing Whitman’s reputation after death. A poet for the nation needed a monument for the nation, and this monument would have two parts: a textualized tomb and a tomblike text. Whitman set the trajectory of his legacy by planning his tomb, but the textual component of the memorial needed to be completed by others.
4. “TALLYING THE MAN FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE”

By the end of the nineteenth century, the development of a textbook industry and the rise of public libraries expanded the market for all kinds of editions of American authors. Libraries and universal education were promoted as civic investments, and books that canonized the venerable poets of the United States complemented their mission. Houghton Mifflin led American publishers in catering to this demand, publishing numerous patriotic series of biographies and compilations of American statesmen and authors under the direction of editor Horace Scudder, who also edited the *Atlantic Monthly*. Scudder wrote on educational theory, promoting ideas that would in turn promote his company’s books. In his 1888 *Literature in School* he described the dying generation of America poets:

They were born on American soil; they have breathed American air; they were nurtured on American ideas. They are Americans of Americans. They are as truly the issue of our national life as are the common schools in which we glory. During the fifty years in which our common-school system has been growing to maturity, these six have lived and sung; and I dare to say that the lives and songs of Bryant, Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, and Lowell have an imperishable value regarded as exponents of national life.  

Whitman was conspicuously absent from his list, reflecting his tenuous position among the literary establishment near the end of the century. Scudder himself supervised the creation of several large collected editions of deceased American authors: Lowell, Whittier, Thoreau, Bryant, Holmes, Emerson, and Hawthorne. These expansive posthumous editions asserted something that authorially supervised editions could not: that after the author’s death, the culture found him worthy of such a collection, and, in most cases, that even his juvenilia and unpublished writings—which the author may not have wanted to claim—should be preserved in a textual monument to his development as a genius.

Though Houghton Mifflin stood as the leading producer of these monuments, for many years they did not deem Whitman worthy of such treatment. They even initially rejected his inclusion in the more modest Men of Letters series. In 1898, Charles Dudley Warner, the series editor, wrote to Houghton Mifflin explaining:
To me his name still stands in doubt.

Whatever he is, could you in any way call him a Man of Letters?

If he is a genius, is he a poet? He defies all form. I recognize genius in places. But he was an awful poser. Some time before his death, when he was supposed to be in destitution, Mr. Cary of the Century, at great trouble, organized readings for him in New York, and raised some money. When he died it was found that he saved up about $5000 to build himself a monument!

Whitman’s financial dealings would seem irrelevant to his status as a poet, but Warner saw the tomb affair as evidence of Whitman overreaching in defining his legacy, and wanted no part in extending that overreach by “admitting him among the poets.” The publishers agreed, and would not treat Whitman in an homage volume for several years. If Whitman was going to receive the extended, reverential treatment of a multivolume edition, the task would fall to those personally invested in ensuring his legacy, his executors.

Whitman’s will named Traubel, Bucke, and Harned as his literary executors. In the years preceding and immediately following Whitman’s death, the executors, who viewed Whitman as a religious figure as much as a poet, were deeply concerned with regulating Whitman’s public image. Traubel, Harned, and Bucke, in particular, were keenly worried about Whitman’s legacy, and feared that other students of Whitman, such as Kennedy or the British contingency of Whitman followers, would begin publishing on Whitman in ways that would challenge the image of him—and of themselves—that they hoped to project. Even before Whitman was dead Bucke wrote to Traubel that their purpose in writing In Re Walt Whitman was to “preempt the WW market.”

Traubel was very concerned with J. A. Symonds’s noncondemnatory insistence that “Calamus” was about homosexual love, which Traubel viewed as libelous. To avert such an interpretation of Whitman’s life, and no doubt to publicly affirm their own authority in such matters, Bucke, Traubel, and Harned, with some guidance from Whitman himself, released In Re Walt Whitman, as they described it, a “cluster of written matter—abstract, descriptive, anecdotal, biographical, statistical, poetic.” The book affirmed the executors’ authority in its creation by stating in all capitals on the title page that it was “edited by his literary executors.” Even the title’s “In Re” invokes a legalese that underscored the executors’ role. The book includes expository and creative work by critics, acolytes, and Whitman himself, and declares the executors as the post-
humorous arbiters of Whitman criticism. Whitman’s precarious reputation at the time of his death required, or seemed to require, such maneuvers from his executors. Bucke, Traubel, and Harned were dually influenced by their status as devoted followers—a status most literary editors do not share—and by their perceived responsibility to secure a positive view of Whitman that would poise him for his rightful legacy. For Bucke and Traubel, at least, this was as much a spiritual duty as a personal one. In the decade after Whitman’s death the executors’ most pressing concern was not yet to issue an edition of his work. Instead, they focused on releasing critical materials and selected correspondence that would help them regulate Whitman’s image. Whitman’s executors, motivated by their devotion to Whitman and by the desire to preempt the Whitman market, published between 1892 and 1902 one hundred works about Whitman.

As Whitman’s executors were fortifying his posthumous reputation, they began amassing the materials for a large collected edition, and found a collaborator in Oscar Lovell Triggs, a literature instructor at the University of Chicago who had published on Whitman and advocated for his poetry after Whitman’s death—in fact, Triggs was the earliest known college faculty member to teach a course on Whitman, beginning in 1894. Sharing the editing of the 1902 edition with Triggs was smart: Triggs brought an academic prestige to the project that the other editors, well known as personal friends and disciples to Whitman, could not.

The executors chose George Putnam’s Sons as the publisher for the edition. Putnam’s Sons was an appealing option. While Houghton Mifflin was the clear leader in publishing collected editions of great American authors, Putnam’s Sons—which had published only a few such editions, of Cooper, Irving, and Poe—had built a similar reputation for publishing collected editions of the writings of major figures in the history of American democracy. From 1885 to 1900, Putnam’s Sons had published collected editions of Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Monroe, Paine, Hamilton, Madison, Roosevelt, and, notably, Whitman’s beloved Lincoln. Houghton Mifflin may not have found Whitman deserving of such treatment, but he was in good company at Putnam’s Sons, whose imprimatur subtly suggested Whitman’s significance as a figure of his American epoch. Also, Putnam’s Sons’ printing arm, the Knickerbocker Press, had ties to the American Arts and Crafts movement, through which Triggs and Traubel had become acquainted. The two men viewed Whitman—with his firmly held beliefs about the role of the author as a craftsman in bookmaking—as a model artisan within the
movement. The Knickerbocker Press produced the edition in accordance with the movement’s aesthetics: each volume’s title page is printed with a woodcut floral motif, characteristic red and black ink, and typeface imitative of productions from William Morris’s Kelmscott Press (figs. 7 and 8). Aspects of this design are echoed through the volumes in ornamental flourishes and the modernized gothic typeface used for titles of poems. These visual cues, along with the binding and high quality of deckled paper used in some of the editions, asserted that Whitman was a poet deserving of luxurious and reverential treatment. As Kenneth M. Price and Ed Folsom put it, “Anyone looking at this edition of his work knew immediately that it looked like the work of a major author.”

The Complete Writings was published in ten volumes:


The edition included four significant editorial and critical contributions: the biographical introduction by Harned and Traubel, and three pieces of original work by Triggs—“The Growth of Leaves of Grass,” a bibliography, and a lengthy and rather cumbersome variorum. The book was published in six different versions, or “editions” as the publisher called them, which ranged in quality and price and were given names that connected them to Whitman. Copies of the various versions were limited as follows:

National Edition (500 copies)
Camden Book Lover’s Edition (500)
Paumanok Edition (300)
Fig. 7. Title page from *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, George Putnam’s Sons, 1902.
Fig. 8. “Note by William Morris on His Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press,” Kelmscott Press, 1895.
Triggs's contributions and Putnam's Sons' marketing were both crucial to the success of the edition, which quickly became desirable collectors' items. Reviews of the edition were largely positive, and typically pointed to Triggs's contributions and the physical properties of the books as the edition's strongest qualities. By the time the volumes were released, Bucke and Traubel had gained a reputation as hopeless acolytes, prompting many reviewers to approach their role in the edition with some suspicion—such fawning idolatry, they typically believed, could only interfere with a well-balanced edition. To be sure, the disciples were not disinterested in the edition. Michael Robertson has argued that Whitman's religious followers viewed *Leaves of Grass* as scripture, and therefore viewed excerpting it as a kind of sacrilege that failed to comprehend or respect the entirety of Whitman's spiritual message. This attitude surfaces throughout their introduction—they insist that “*Leaves of Grass* is one poem. . . . Its foundation is a man moral, aesthetic, religious, emotional, meditative, patriotic. It tallies this man from the cradle to the grave. Nay, more, before the cradle and beyond the grave, limitless either way, accepting neither a beginning nor an end.” Such worshipful remarks—later they describe Whitman as “one of the great spiritual forces of the modern world”—struck some reviewers as inappropriately hagiographic. However, the prominent involvement of Triggs, whose PhD was noted on the title page of each volume, appeased many reviewers' concerns and invited them to approach the critical apparatuses as more objective work. A reviewer for the *Outlook* faults the biographical introduction because its “note of appreciation is much more distinctly sounded than that of judicial appraisement.” Similarly, he claims that “the editors of this edition would have better served [Whitman's] memory if their interpretation had been a little better balanced.” However, the reviewer describes the volume as “sumptuous,” and believes that “the old poet would hardly recognize himself in so magnificent a form.” Tellingly, when he lists the contents of the volumes, he affixes the title “Mr.” to Bucke, and “Dr.” to Triggs. Although Bucke was a psychiatrist, it was the academic credentials of Triggs that stood out to the reviewer. In this response to Whitman, we may see the first intimations that the reading public would eventually prefer a profes-
sional, disinterested editorial stance over the work of friends and family that so often characterized nineteenth-century editions.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson—who harbored a well-known hatred for Whitman, seeing him as overly sexual, egotistical, and cowardly—wrote a review of the Complete Writings in the Nation that was surprisingly positive, pointing specifically to “its mechanical execution” and to “that absolutely fearless candor which only the profoundest faith in their author can secure for editors.” Higginson notes their “profoundest faith” as an asset, but when he details what he views as the edition’s chief virtues, he points mostly to the work of Triggs. “The present editors,” he acknowledges respectfully, “do not shrink from inserting not only the details of every change, but even the unprinted variations which have hitherto existed in manuscript only.” Triggs’s variorum tracked the printed changes in each of the editions—of which he included the 1876 issue—and included transcriptions of manuscript versions of selected poems. Triggs clearly did not avail himself of all the manuscripts then owned by the three executors, and concentrated mostly on the major poems, such as “Song of Myself” and “I Sing the Body Electric.” Nevertheless, the scope of the variorum at over one hundred pages long impressed readers such as Higginson as comprehensive.

The early reviews of the Complete Writings demonstrate a concern about the edition that would be echoed decades later about the Collected Writings, and later still about the Walt Whitman Archive. Higginson notes that while it is “desirable, especially in dealing with a peculiarly original and innovating poet, to know the successive phases and forms of his literary productions, . . . this might seem to the author himself very undesirable.” Similarly, an Athenaeum reviewer claims:

> Whenever a man has really impressed his mark on literature some one will be found to disinter his juvenilia and hackwork from the quiet repose to which their author is inclined to leave them. We do not say that this is a bad thing for literature on the whole, though it often gives us books in which a great name vouches for material of little or no absolute value.

Both reviewers admire the editorial apparatuses of the edition, but both express some ambivalence about including what Ed Folsom has called the “discarded writings” of the poet—“doubtful piety,” as the Athenaeum reviewer called it. Their concerns about including passages that were altered or disowned, however, shows a marked shift from commentators’ concerns
only a decade prior. Immediately after Whitman’s death, many reviewers set about trying to publicly determine which of his poems were best, as those would be the ones they thought would endure. Though opinions were mixed, and favorites ranged from the predictable “O Captain” to the less expected “Sail Out for Good, Eidólon Yacht,” the overall effect of these reviews was to begin the work of distilling the copious writings of a poet of inconsistent quality down to the select few that could prove timeless. Such efforts marked the precarious canonical position of Whitman in the 1890s, a fact that did not escape his executors. After Arthur Stedman published a selection of Whitman poems that he found “most nearly in harmony with the poetic era,” Traubel decried the volume as an “expurgation.” The publication of Complete Writings, though, changed the terms of the debate. Instead of questioning which of Whitman’s published poems would endure, reviewers were now asking whether his unpublished scraps should be preserved. Over the first decade after his death, the central question of admitting Whitman to the canon was one of winnowing. But the editors and publisher of the Complete Writings made a bold assertion with the 1902 edition that pruning and preserving Whitman’s poetry were to be performed just as they would for any other major and legitimate poet. Even the Outlook reviewer, who retained some doubt about Whitman’s consistency and endurance, believed by 1902 that such an edition was “inevitable”:

Whitman would gain, as no other American writer would gain, by a representative selection of the best that he wrote, detached from that mass of his writing which expressed his temper and his point of view rather than illustrates his genius. A complete edition of Whitman was, however, inevitable, and no ardent lover of the poet could ask for his work in handsomer form.

Whitman’s editors knew they were enshrining Whitman in their monumental edition. In the introduction, Traubel and Harned wrote, “Whitman is the book, and the book is Whitman. And this Whitman is a thousand times vaster than either the book or the man. . . Walt Whitman, cosmically construed, is the blood and brawn of the book.” They emphasized the joint identity of Whitman and his book, even making the surprising and dubious claim that they, as his friends, had no special knowledge of him: “those who absolutely knew Whitman in the flesh had no real experience not realized as well by those who have known him by the books.” They saw their job as the steward of Whitman’s textual afterlife, the guardian of his new form.
They believed as Whitman did that he would be either entirely embraced or decidedly rejected, explaining, “When he died there were many who smacked their lips with satisfaction and declared that he was dead indeed. But he has lived on with dramatic persistency.” The dramatic persistency was theirs, who worked so concertedly to buoy his posthumous reputation.

One of the more intriguing episodes recounted in the editors’ introduction is Whitman’s funeral, which they describe as a kind of mystical carnival, in which thousands of people, many of which with no conscious understanding, felt pulled into the celebratory procession, where fakirs were selling fruit and wares and there was much “merrymaking” among “the kaleidoscopic features of the country fair” before assembling at Whitman’s tomb. In the last volume of the Complete Writings, largely an assemblage of “fragments left by Walt Whitman,” lies a prefatory photograph (fig. 9) depicting the tomb: there lies Whitman’s remains in the granite monument, next to the literary remains that lie in his textual one.