A Boundary-dissolving Binding: The Eclectic Composition Underlying the First Edition of Leaves of Grass

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Abstract

ABSTRACT: A century and a half has gone by since Whitman’s famous leaves first came off the press. Though the first edition did not reach the multitudinous audience Whitman had in mind, looking back in time, we can conclude that few poetry books have received so much critical attention. Whitman’s Leaves of Grass has been the object of a titanic amount of criticism. However, scholarship is still at hard pains to explain how Whitman managed to create then a work that seems to belong more to the avant-garde arts of the 20thc. than to a prebellum America. An in-depth analysis of his method of composition, focusing, among other things, on correctly dated manuscripts and notebooks, his expertise as printer and newspaperman, an his connection with the visual arts, will eventually contribute to shed new light on some of the true merits of this groundbreaking work.

RESUMEN: Ha transcurrido ya un siglo y medio desde que las famosas hojas de Whitman salieran por primera vez de la imprenta. Aunque Whitman no consiguió con su primera edición llegar a una audiencia multitudinaria, si echamos una mirada atrás en el tiempo, concluiremos que pocos libros de poesía han conseguido recibir tanta atención crítica. Hojas de hierba ha sido objeto de una cantidad titánica de estudios críticos. No obstante lo anterior, la crítica aún no ha conseguido explicar de qué forma Whitman consiguió crear una obra que parece enmarcarse más en las artes de vanguardia del siglo XX que en la América prebélica del siglo XIX. Un análisis profundo de su método de composición, un análisis que incida, entre otras cuestiones, en el estudio de los manuscritos y notas correctamente fechados, su destrezas como impresor y periodista, y su conexión con las artes visuales, podría contribuir a que consigamos un mejor enfoque de los méritos de esta obra revolucionaria.

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bound in heavy paper, with plain covers in gray or dark brown, and on the spine only a pasted label, showing the author's name and the title. “Leaves of Grass” is a book full of inspiring poems; Walt Whitman issued the first of many editions more than 100 years ago in 1895. Many writers translated this book into many languages, especially into Spanish but its best translation was by the famous author and poet “Jorge Luis Borges”. “Leaves of Grass” is a volume of poetry in a new kind of versification because he praised the human body and glorified the senses. In 1855 edition of “Leaves of Grass” contained 12 untitled poems, written in long cadenced lines that resemble the unhymed verse of the king of James Version in the Bible. No other poem in the first edition has the power of this poem, although “The Sleepers”, another visionary flight, symbolizing life, death, and rebirth, comes nearest. The red aborigines, Leaving natural breaths, sounds of rain and winds, calls as of birds and animals in the woods, syllabled to us for names, Okonee, Koosa, Ottawa, Monongahela, Sauk, Natchez, Chattahoochee, Kaqueta, Oronoco, Wabash, Miami, Saginaw, Chippewa, Oshkosh, Walla-Walla, Leaving such to the States they melt, they depart, charging the water and the land with names. my poems as upon their own shores, See, pastures and forests in my poems--see, animals wild and tame--see, beyond the Kaw, countless herds of buffalo feeding on short curly grass, See, in my poems, cities, solid, vast, inland, with paved streets, with iron and stone edifices, ceaseless vehicles, and commerce, See, the many-cylinder’d steam printing-press--see, the electric.