

The Portable Walt Whitman

Edited with an Introduction by
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PENGUIN BOOKS

Introduction

When *Leaves of Grass* first appeared in July 1855, in a private printing of about 800 copies, everything about the book seemed odd. It was a very thin volume with big pages. The dark green binding was embossed so that the lettering of the title snaked off in raised, leaf-like patterns, roots and tendrils groping across the cover. Neither the cover nor the title page named the author; only an engraved picture stood on the frontispiece. Whitman had worked with the engraver, Samuel Hollyer, shaping the image with the fastidiousness of a publicist, but it struck contemporaries as an improbable picture of a poet: a man "in his shirt-sleeves, with one hand in a pocket of his pantaloons," a daringly unbuttoned collar, and his hat "cocked with a damme-sir air over his forehead."¹

Readers who made it past this portrait of edgy swagger (already recognizable as a New York type) found next what another bewildered reviewer described as "a sort of preface, only that it had no beginning, was remarkable for a singular sparseness in the punctuation, and was broken up in a confusing manner by frequent rows of dots." Beyond that lay "eighty-two pages of what appeared at the first glance to be a number of prose sentences printed somewhat after a biblical fashion."² Each of the twelve separate pieces in that first edition was called "Leaves of Grass," nothing more. As more than one reviewer noted, there seemed to be nothing poetic about them except that each line began with a capital letter. They did not rhyme; they had no meter; the lines were of wildly uneven length, often wrapping around into more than one line of print;

they grasped the reader by the lapels; they flouted expectations about "poetic" writing; and no topic or body part seemed to have been left out.

Nowadays we might be inclined to call the lines "free verse," a form so common that it could even be called the dominant kind of verse. For most readers, rhyme and meter have come to look archaic. In that way, if in no other, we have all fallen under Whitman's influence. The 1855 preface agitates for this revolution in taste, in its somewhat cryptic way. Whitman calls on poetry to be essentially *modern*, implying that it must address modern life not only in its content, but in form. More than anyone else before him, Whitman understood his art as normatively experimental.

That is not to say that it should be formless poetry, which would be a contradiction in terms. Whitman's long line, for example, does not look like earlier poetry, but it is a device in its own right. In earlier English verse, and most later free verse for that matter, the arbitrary line break sustains a constant tension against the impression of a speaking voice. Rhyme and meter heighten that tension, creating a constant backdrop of sonic patterning. For Whitman, the line break has a new function. It depends entirely on print, for we would not otherwise know that it was there at all. (Whitman, who had been a printer in his youth, set some of the type himself in 1855.) He minimizes the feeling of arbitrariness, however, because his lines are almost always end-stopped; he treats them as units of sense as much as of sound. Despite its reliance on print, this effect helps to create on the page the sense of a vital vocal exposure or challenge—like opera or oratory, the arts he most admired. But another effect of the long line—with its *ad hoc* sonic patterning and un-subordinated accumulation—is to keep us guessing, uncertain where its sequence might take us or what kind of text we might be reading.

For Whitman's contemporaries, as for attentive readers still, it took a stretch to call this poetry. It seemed to have neither pattern nor decorum. "Muck of abomination," said one; "a mass of stupid filth," said another.³ "Walt Whitman," said a

third, "is as unacquainted with art, as a hog is with mathematics."⁴ Of course, Whitman had wanted to arouse just this sort of reaction. He himself wrote, in one of several puffs of his own work that he published anonymously, that the book would appear "very devilish to some, and very divine to some."⁵ He even went so far as to include his worst reviews in a promotional packet, a gesture almost without precedent. He wanted to agitate, and he succeeded.

In later life Whitman dropped some of his zeal for provocation and put on the equanimity of the sage; but censors and censorious readers continued to rise up against him. In 1865, when he was working as a minor clerk for the government, the Secretary of the Interior fired him after reportedly finding a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. (Cabinet members in those days evidently had enough time on their hands to snoop through their clerks' desk drawers.) Publishers repeatedly refused to handle him. In 1882 the Boston district attorney threatened him with prosecution for obscenity, and his new edition of *Leaves*—the first with a respectable, established publisher—was withdrawn. Good people shuddered at his name. John Greenleaf Whittier threw his copy of *Leaves* into the fire in disgust. Emily Dickinson confessed that she never read Whitman, having been "told that he was disgraceful."

On the other side, he attracted defenders, who wrote such apologies as *The Good Gray Poet*, "A Woman's View of Walt Whitman," and after his death, *The Fight of a Book for the World*. His work for the most part no longer needs justification, which is perhaps a pity; it was written to *need* justification.

If the difficulty for early readers lay partly with the shape of the lines, or the absence of rhyme or meter, queerer still was the way the language seemed deliberately out of kilter. This is still true, even though we can no longer be shocked and overwhelmed by it as his contemporaries were. Whitman's writing is both eloquent and crass, exquisite and obscene. It provokes the reader and yet solicits an extraordinary intimacy. It offers a simple address to common people, while bristling with esoteric imaginings. It brags of its author's egotism, yet displays un-

commonly wide sympathies for others. It strikes an attitude of rich perceptiveness toward the world that is both willfully profane and yet reverent, a mysticism of the mundane. It seeks the greatest dignity in the least dignified forms of experience.

These tensions have not lost their power to move and unsettle readers. Whitman has had many imitators, and has influenced almost every poet after him, but in these qualities he has never been equaled. To read even his description of daily life, or his lists of the people around him, is to encounter the world with an attentiveness and generosity that feels both moving and painfully exacting. We no longer dispute whether the book deserves to be read, or whether it is poetry—though we might wonder whether poetry is too banal or too familiar a name for this kind of writing and what it does to its readers.

The whole shape of Whitman's career proved to be as anomalous as the book's first appearance. Where most authors write one book and then another, Whitman essentially wrote the same book over and over. Seven substantially different editions of *Leaves of Grass* were published in his lifetime, along with a few minor variants. New poems would be added each time, old ones rewritten, and the structure of the book rearranged. As a result, critics remain divided over the merits of different editions, and no one version of *Leaves of Grass* can stand alone to capture Whitman's work. In this collection, the poems are taken from the last edition, the so-called "Deathbed Edition" of 1891-92 (with the exception of two draft versions, noted in their place). The poems are given here, however, in the chronological order of their introduction into the volume.

In 1855 *Leaves of Grass* had no publisher. It was available for sale in shops run by Whitman's friends Fowler and Wells, where the main business was phrenology—the popular pseudoscience of reading the shapes of people's skulls as signs of their characters. (Fowler and Wells told Whitman that he had a very large bump indicating "adhesiveness," or bonding with members of the same sex.) Advertisements also directed buyers to Whitman's home on Ryerson Street in Brooklyn, where he still lived with his family. He promoted the book with the energy and unscrupulousness of a desperate crank, sending copies

to everyone he could think of, writing anonymous reviews himself, and placing them with the help of journalist friends. To his enemies, of course, this self-promotion confirmed the uncouthness they saw in the writing.

Luckily, one of the promotional copies was sent to Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose work Whitman had followed for some time. When Emerson had visited New York in 1842 to deliver a lecture on "The Poet," Whitman—then a twenty-two-year-old journalist—was in the audience. Poets, Emerson told the crowd that day, had not yet faced the emergent conditions of American life. They were too busy being poetic. "It is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem," he declared. "Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, methodism and unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy."

"I look in vain for the poet I describe," Emerson had said in that lecture. Thirteen years later, when he received the unsolicited book from a stranger, Emerson evidently decided he had found what he was looking for. He wrote back what has been called the most famous letter in American literary history:

Dear Sir,

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of "Leaves of Grass." I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile & stingy nature, as if too much handiwork or too much lymph in the temperament were making our western wits fat & mean. I give you joy of your free brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of *treatment*, which so delights us, & which large perception only can inspire. I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying & encouraging.

I did not know until I, last night, saw the book advertised in a

newspaper, that I could trust the name as real & available for a post-office. I wish to see my benefactor, & have felt much like striking my tasks, & visiting New York to pay you my respects.

Indeed he did pay his respects, calling on Whitman in the depths of Brooklyn. Henry Thoreau and Bronson Alcott, alerted to Whitman's existence by Emerson, made the same pilgrimage the next year. From them we learn that Whitman shared a room and a bed with his retarded brother. He entertained them in a red flannel undershirt and cowhide boots, "rank," sitting on the unmade bed, with the chamber pot in view. On the wall he had pasted unframed pictures of Hercules, Bacchus, and a satyr. According to Alcott, Whitman and Thoreau held each other in wary fascination, "like two beasts."

Whitman did not waste the chance he had been given. He had Emerson's letter printed in the New York *Tribune*, and then appended it to the next edition of his book, in 1856. There he also printed a treatise disguised as a letter of response, addressing Emerson as "Master." (This letter, seldom read but a major statement of Whitman's aims, is included in this volume.) Not only that: he emblazoned the phrase "I greet you at the beginning of a great career" on the spine. Emerson, initially angered by this, loaned his copy to a friend with the wry remark that "the inside was worthy [of] attention even though it came from one capable of so misusing the cover."⁶

Yet it was immediately perceived that Whitman was no one's disciple, certainly no junior Emerson. Charles Eliot Norton, in the very first review of *Leaves*, had described him as "a compound of the New England transcendentalist and New York rowdy." The "rowdy" part was largely a pose, but Whitman was distinguished by a worldliness unlike anything that had come out of New England.

His roots were in working-class New York. He had been born on Long Island, the second of eight children. His father, who died just days after *Leaves* appeared, was a not-too-successful carpenter. The family left Long Island for Brooklyn when Walt was four, and when they returned to the country ten years later, he stayed behind as a printer's apprentice. He was

later to return to the country for a while as a rural school teacher and journalist, before again returning to the city and its newspapers. This early immersion in print and journalism can be seen everywhere in the poetry that came later: the descriptions of contemporary life; the sense of being modern; the techniques of social montage and thumbnail characterization; the intimate and urgent address to strangers in a reading public.

His newspaper writing, in the style of the day, was sometimes sentimental, sometimes fiercely polemical. It ranged widely over civic affairs, human interest stories, reviews, and local sketches. Whitman also published in this early period some conventional poetry, a few short stories, and in 1842, a temperance novel called *Franklin Evans*. (He reprinted it twice in the next few years, but later disowned it, even claiming that he wrote it for pay, in three days, with the aid of a bottle of port.) This early fiction—such as "The Child's Champion," included in this volume in its original, uncensored form—is sensational and appealingly crude. Its style gives little hint of the poetry to come, except in its surges of homoeroticism and richly disorganized consciousness.

In his political journalism, Whitman followed a principle that late in life he passed on to his young acolyte Horace Traubel: "Be radical, be radical, be radical—be not too damned radical."⁷ Though he supported the Mexican War in 1848, he soon called for an end to the extension of slavery, and lost his job at the *Brooklyn Eagle* for supporting the Wilmot Proviso. He fumed over the fugitive slave law. When a black man named Anthony Burns was forced back into slavery after reaching freedom in Boston, Whitman wrote an acrid satirical poem, one of the earliest pieces of what would become *Leaves of Grass*, along with another supporting the cause of European revolution. He wrote and typeset (but never published) a vein-popping pamphlet for the 1856 election in which, among other things, he described President Franklin Pierce as a man who "eats dirt and excrement for his daily meals, likes it, and tries to force it on The States." He would later lose another editorial post at the *Brooklyn Times*, apparently in part for endorsing legalized prostitution and the right of unmarried women to have sex.

But his most passionate commitments were the causes of working men.

Antagonism to middle-class prejudice runs throughout his writing, both poetry and prose. Many who knew him tell us how widely he was known and liked on the streets; he would glad-hand street-car conductors, porters, laborers of all kinds. He took Emerson to meet his friends at the firehouse. Yet when admirers tried to introduce him to literati, he was often uncomfortable and silent. In his correspondence, letters to well-bred men of letters sound stiff, painfully formal; those to soldiers, or horse-cart drivers, or his own mother, speak with a sweet and simple eloquence. Friends offered him comfortable homes on Fifth Avenue, on the Hudson, and elsewhere; but from the early days in Brooklyn to his old age in Camden, he chose to live in working-class quarters that appalled his visitors. His sense of self seems to have been marked by awareness of class in a way that was both enabling and painful.

Even his opposition to slavery had much to do with fear for the jobs of white workers. Like Lincoln, Whitman never liked black people in general, though he believed abstractly in equality. Along with most of his contemporaries in the North, he was reluctant to recognize that his own commitment to democracy was leading to experiments in multiracial culture and citizenship. His politics had outpaced his sensibilities.

Yet because his poetic vision committed him to a view from below, to sympathies with outcasts, he was capable of surprising turns, like the eroticization of the black slave in "I Sing the Body Electric," or like an extraordinary notebook entry about "Black Lucifer" that declares "I am the God of revolt—deathless, sorrowful, vast." From that entry he produced this passage from the 1855 version of "The Sleepers" (excised from 1860 onward):

Now Lucifer was not dead . . . or if he was I am his sorrowful
terrible heir;
I have been wronged. . . . I am oppressed. . . . I hate him that
oppresses me,
I will either destroy him, or he shall release me.

Damn him! how he does defile me,
How he informs against my brother and sister and takes pay for
their blood,
How he laughs when I look down the bend after the steamboat
that carries away my woman.

This rhetoric of insurgency, conspicuous in the first version of *Leaves of Grass*, and heightened further in the second edition of 1856, was to be toned down in later versions.

It has been customary to see Whitman's later career as dwindling into respectability. He published an astonishing volume of major work between 1855 and 1865; the last quarter-century of his life suffers by comparison. A stroke sustained in 1873 left him partly paralyzed; he moved to Camden, New Jersey, to be cared for by his brother's family. For the poet who had always prided himself on health and robust physicality, illness would be a psychic challenge for the rest of his life. His admirers had already begun to legitimize him as "the Good Gray Poet"—a label affixed to him by William O'Connor in 1866—and to some degree Whitman came to live that role rather than that of the New York rowdy.

It proved to be a good role for him. Whitman was capable of inspiring intense devotion, even among those who knew nothing of his work. Notoriety gradually gave way to fame. Though never fully accepted in his lifetime, he was in later years recognized by some leading lights of the literary world, including Tennyson. To pay him tribute, many went all the way to Camden, where he lived in a cheap house near a ferryboat station, receiving callers amid scraps of paper and books piled knee-deep on the floor. Among these pilgrims was Oscar Wilde, who saw Whitman there twice. ("I have the kiss of Walt Whitman's still on my lips," he later told a young gay Englishman.)

Whitman had acquired by this time a cult following in a rather literal sense. People were beginning to revere him not just as a poet, but as a religious inspiration. John Addington Symonds, for example, first encountered Whitman in 1865, when his friend Fredric Myers read one of the "Calamus" lyrics aloud to him during an illness. Years later, Symonds wrote:

For my own part, I may confess that [Whitman's light] shone upon me when my life was broken, when I was weak, sickly, poor, and of no account; and that I have ever lived thenceforward in the light and warmth of it. In bounden duty toward Whitman, I make this personal statement. . . . During my darkest hours, it comforted me with the conviction that I too played my part in the illimitable symphony of cosmic life. . . . For this reason, in duty to my master Whitman, and in the hope that my experience may encourage others to seek the same source of inspiration, I have exceeded the bounds of an analytical essay by pouring forth my personal confession.

Exceeded the bounds of an analytical essay, indeed.

Symonds in this moment of excess seems to have intuited something about the way Whitman wanted to be read. In "A Backward Glance," Whitman writes: "But it is not on 'Leaves of Grass' distinctively as *literature*, or a specimen thereof, that I feel to dwell, or advance claims. No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism." He had instructed readers as early as the 1855 preface, in what sounds like his own version of the Sermon on the Mount:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem. . . .

Buried in this odd catalogue of commandments is the plea to read his pages—or does he really mean leaves?—"every season

of every year of your life." He invites us to take the book as a spiritual exercise.

Symonds was not alone among early readers in taking Whitman to be the vehicle of something like a sacred revelation. Religion was the watchword, virtually the shibboleth of the Whitmaniacs—the extended Euro-American network, mostly of young men marked by nonstandard erotic lives, as well as a few women of nonstandard erotic lives, who found each other through Whitman's texts and tenaciously defended him both in private and in public. One such reader, an English widow named Anne Gilchrist, declared love for Whitman and, sight unseen, moved to America to be near him.

The gathering of the Whitmaniacs into a kind of cult toward the end of Whitman's life is a phenomenon without a close parallel among figures now accepted as literary authors. Other authors have fans, and in the case of a Jane Austen or a William Shakespeare, those fans can approach a state we are accustomed to call idolatrous. Whitman's idolators are of a different order. They seem to have taken seriously his claim, in "Starting from Paumanok," to "inaugurate a religion." No other modern literary figure has attracted, in his life or after, such explicitly religious veneration. Professional critics define themselves against this kind of reading, and it should not be a surprise that the Whitmaniacs fare rather badly in the critical literature on Whitman.

Most conspicuous among these figures was Richard Maurice Bucke, who virtually canonized Whitman in his *Cosmic Consciousness* in 1903, and thus indirectly in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, where the impossibly good-natured Whitman is essentially Bucke's Whitman. In Bucke's biographical study *Walt Whitman*, of which the first twenty pages or so were written by Whitman himself, Bucke quotes at length a letter by Helen Price, who knew Whitman when she was a girl and Whitman was an occasional boarder and regular visitor in the home of her mother:

If I were asked what I considered Walt Whitman's leading characteristic, I should say—and it is an opinion formed upon an ac-

quaintance of over twenty years—his *religious sentiment* or feeling. . . . He is a born *exalté*. His is not that religion, or show of it, that is comprised in dogmas, churches, creeds, etc. These are of little or no consequence to him, but it is that habitual state of feeling in which the person regards everything in God's universe with wonder, reverence, perfect acceptance, and love.⁸

Whitman later told Price that she had made him sound "too pretty."

It is characteristic of the Anglo-American religious scene that Helen Price describes as "religious sentiment" something that has no place for "dogmas, churches, creeds, etc." Religion reduced to sentiment will seem to many hardly to warrant the name, especially since in Whitman this sentiment has been detached from any idea of spiritual indwelling that had ordinarily motivated the antinomian and anti-institutional rhetoric of the Quakers and other radical Protestants whom we know Whitman admired. At one point a Dutch Reformed pastor, who knew of Whitman's early education in Dutch Reformed Sunday school in Brooklyn, asked him if Whitman still adhered to the creed of the church. Whitman thought for a second and then said yes. Absolutely. In fact, he explained, he believed in the creeds of all the sects.

That so many of Whitman's followers regarded him as a religious figure is all the more surprising since, of all American writers, Whitman was uniquely positioned as the heir to the radical Enlightenment critique of religion. He was a child and adolescent apprentice in New York during the flowering of a rare militant free-thought movement, led by Frances Wright. Wright took over a former church and converted it to a "Hall of Science," where she offered programs of public education and debate as a substitute for Christian ritual and preaching. (Whitman's "Hoorah for positive science!" section in "Song of Myself" is a clear echo of this movement.) Halls of science sprang up in other cities besides New York; lectures were given in place of sermons, and followers were encouraged to regard each other as fellows among the faithful. Wright appealed especially to a working-class audience, through what came to be

known as the Fanny Wright Party. The conjunction she forged—free thought, labor, abolition, feminism, and free love—would leave its stamp on *Leaves of Grass* thirty years later. Whitman heard Wright speak, venerated her, kept a copy of her picture, and spoke of her more than once in his conversations with Traubel. His father subscribed to the journal Wright edited with Robert Dale Owen, the *Free Enquirer*. Whitman evidently read the journal then, as well as other works of programmatic secularism that his father owned, including Paine's *Age of Reason* and Volney's *The Ruins*. (Whitman's notes on Volney made their way into "Passage to India.") He also read Wright's 1822 philosophical novel about Epicurean atheism, *A Few Days in Athens*, passages from which appear verbatim in *Leaves of Grass*.

The rhetoric of free-thought radicalism is unmistakable in *Leaves of Grass* ("There will soon be no more priests"), and contemporary readers who were not Whitmaniacs tended to perceive irreligion as its program. They also whiffed pagan phallic worship and pantheism, which for many at the time seem to have counted as irreligion. At the same time that Whitman was attracting converts such as Symonds and Bucke, he was also drawing radical secularists such as Robert Ingersoll, who emerged in the postwar period as far and away the most prominent American skeptic on religion, and who became a friend and champion of Whitman in his own right, giving the eulogy after Whitman's death.

To understand how Whitman appealed to both kinds of reader, we should note first that his rhetoric about religion is consistently counterintuitive. He speaks a language of God, but its main point seems to be to get us to shed the habit of worshipping something outside ourselves. "Nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is," he writes in section 48 of "Song of Myself." "And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God." Unlike Milton or Wordsworth, he does not undertake to justify God's ways to man; nothing needs justification, evil included. Far from propagating morality, Whitman sees it as his task to invert hierarchies of judgment, giving full recognition to those stigmatized by official morality. There is

no drama of redemption, apart from the need to recognize that nothing needs redemption. Whatever this religion will do for you, it will not give you salvation, except in convincing you that you don't need salvation. If you share his vision, you are promised no reward apart from that vision itself. If you remain an infidel, you are threatened with no punishment. It is a religion to which you cannot exactly convert; you can only cultivate its habits of seeing and feeling. Consider these lines from "Song of Myself":

Divine I am inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or
am touched from;

The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer,
This head is more than churches or bibles or creeds.

Are these lines religious? Or are they, on the contrary, one of the boldest gestures of secularization in American writing?

Part of what makes Whitman such an oddly compelling saint, too, is just what a profane and perverted holy man he is. He loved smelly men, and liked to go home with them. (His notebooks contain long lists of men and boys he met on the street.) He lived at home for many years, and doted on his mother. He was by all accounts lazy, and took a dandy's care over his working rough costume. He promoted himself with an innocence of tact. He made grammatical mistakes, especially when trying to impress by using foreign languages he did not speak.

And he lived with great shame. This is easy to miss because the poetry is, from its first line ("I celebrate myself"), an overcoming of shame. Whitman's individualism—unlike the banal consumer individualism of the twentieth century, which he seems not to have anticipated in any way—is a moral response to a world of inequality. He seems to have felt a vocation to answer for a great many forms of inferiority: of class, of ignorance, of sex, of poverty, of disrepute and disability, of national provincialism.

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.

The intensity of the shame that he resists is sometimes manifest (as in "Scented Herbage of My Breast"), sometimes expressed by a counteracting shamelessness (notably in "Song of Myself," where the speaker sounds his "barbaric yawp" over the roofs of the world), and sometimes faced flatly (as in the quasi-confessional section 6 of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"). It is the implicit backdrop of everything Whitman wrote.

Certainly not least of the motives behind this will-to-dignity is the need to "clarify and transfigure" a kind of sex and lust that had no voice of its own, and could only be expressed in a language of the severest moral anathema—at least until Whitman began calling it "adhesiveness" and "manly love." What else could he have called it? Even the medical language of abnormality was created only in the second half of his life, in circles far removed from his. The modern idea of homosexuality developed at the end of his lifetime; the idea of gay identity much later. These notions, second nature to most readers today, were not available for Whitman; and in fact, as ways of understanding male-male eros, they are markedly different from the strategy he adopted.

For most of the twentieth century, biographers persisted in the vain attempt to heterosexualize Whitman, fabricating romances on the flimsiest of evidence, evidently thinking that queerness was something from which he needed to be exonerated. Some, indeed, still do. Some have noted, rightly, that the culture of male-male friendship was much more fluid in Whitman's time than in our own, largely because there was no idea of homosexuality to be phobic about, and therefore less mandate on men to police themselves against any deviation from heterosexual purity. Men embraced, kissed, posed for pictures with each other, wrote letters of endearment, often with no evident anxiety. Not everything that looks queer to us now would have looked that way in Whitman's time. Scholars have also noted the surprising fact that most of the protest against Whitman's "indecent" had to do with his celebration of male-female sexuality, or autoeroticism, not the (to us) apparent declarations of the "Calamus" poems.

But it would be a great mistake to suppose that Whitman's

same-sex eroticism was therefore merely conventional and untroubling. His enemies might have avoided mentioning it in part because they couldn't bring themselves to think such a shocking possibility. One of Whitman's contemporaries, Rufus Griswold—the same man who assassinated Poe's character after Poe's death—essentially named Whitman as a sodomite in his review of the 1855 *Leaves*. But he did it in Latin, refusing to speak such a vile possibility even while speaking it:

In our allusions to this book, we have found it impossible to convey any, even the most faint idea of its style and contents, and of our disgust and detestation of them, without employing language that cannot be pleasing to ears polite; but it does seem that some one should, under circumstances like these, undertake a most disagreeable, yet stern duty. The records of crime show that many monsters have gone on in impunity, because the exposure of their vileness was attended with too great indelicacy. "*Peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum.*"⁹

The horrible sin not to be named among Christians—is it any wonder that most other objections to the book were vague or displaced? Griswold does not say what passages he had in mind; the version of *Leaves* he read was tame compared with what was to come later. He might have been writing from first- or second-hand knowledge of Whitman, since they had moved in the same circles for at least thirteen years, and Whitman had once worked for a paper owned by Griswold. (Ironically, Whitman, who knew no Latin, included Griswold's review in his publicity packet.)

At any rate, Griswold was not alone. Even John Burroughs, another early Whitmaniac, noted that Whitman went beyond what was conventional for male friendship. As a young man Burroughs had exchanged love letters with other young men, one of whom introduced him to Whitman's work. When he then made the pilgrimage to meet Whitman, he reported back, with some surprise: "He kisses me as if I were a girl." But he also reports: "I have been much with Walt. Have even slept with him. I love him very much."¹⁰

In 1865, when Whitman was living in Washington, he met an eighteen-year-old streetcar conductor named Peter Doyle, who became the first of several younger male companions. Doyle later said that something about Whitman, the last passenger in the car on a stormy night, drew him unaccountably. "We were familiar at once—I put my hand on his knee—we understood." The two were close for several years. By 1870, however, Whitman had reached a crisis, fearing that his love was not returned. He wrote a journal entry, referring to Doyle in code as "16" (for the letter *p*). The partly torn page is covered with underlinings and blacked-out portions, and "him" has been erased and replaced by "her":

Cheating, childish, abandonment of myself, fancying what does not really exist in another, but is all the time in myself alone—utterly deluded & cheated by *myself*, & my own weakness—REMEMBER WHERE I AM MOST WEAK, & most lacking. Yet always preserve a kind spirit & demeanor to 16. BUT PURSUE HER NO MORE.

Whatever else this document tells us, it clearly shows the excruciating power of shame. Even in a private notebook, Whitman censored himself. Other entries have been torn out altogether; this one seems to have been kept as a private lesson in stoicism.

In 1860, when Whitman prepared the third edition of his book, he wrote a special cluster of poems titled "Calamus," dedicated to the theme of manly love. Long slighted, these poems have come to be recognized as major work. They began as a twelve-poem sequence called "Live Oak, with Moss." (This draft version, rediscovered in 1955, is included in this volume.) At some point Whitman broke up the sequence, expanded the group, and replaced the live-oak symbol with calamus, a native wetland rhizome with grass-like spears and a phallic flower. After he had done so, he decided to pair the cluster with another on cross-sex love, eventually called "Children of Adam."

The "Calamus" poems themselves repeatedly suggest that they describe more than conventional friendship. "Scented

Herbage of My Breast," for example, describes a painful struggle with self-censorship:

Do not remain down there so ashamed, herbage of my breast!
Come, I am determined to unbare this broad breast of mine—
 I have long enough stifled and choked;
Emblematic and capricious blades, I leave you—now you serve
 me not,
Away! I will say what I have to say, by itself,
I will escape from the sham that was proposed to me,
I will sound myself and comrades only—I will never again utter
 a call, only their call . . .

Here, as so often before, Whitman voices a transgressive impulse. In this case, however, that impulse also leads him to repudiate his earlier verse and its symbols—"emblematic and capricious blades" being, of course, leaves of grass. A great many of the poems that Whitman added in 1860 have the same gesture of self-revision, notably "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," where the speaker announces that "before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd."

In the "Calamus" poems, differences of form as well as theme are striking. Where the poems of the 1855 version are loud and expansive, seemingly wanting to go on forever, the "Calamus" poems are short, sometimes a mere three lines. Many of them end with an image of wordless intimacy. Gone is the garrulous rough who sounds his barbaric yawp. In his place is a new Whitman, "charged with untold and untellable wisdom," initiating a chosen few into his mysteries by "faint clews and indications," terse, reticent, silent. Although the sequence begins with the claim that it will broadcast the new theme of manly love, it continues to show an awareness of danger and stigma, as in the following poem, which I quote in its entirety:

Here the frailest leaves of me and yet my strongest lasting,
Here I shade and hide my thoughts, I myself do not expose
 them,
And yet they expose me more than all my other poems.

The method of these poems cannot be understood apart from Whitman's struggle with what was deemed unspeakable. Do they "shade and hide" something, or "expose" it?

Years later John Addington Symonds thought he knew. Symonds thought he had found in Whitman the great prophet of same-sex love. When he wrote to an aged Whitman in 1890 with this idea, Whitman sputtered indignation at such a "vile imputation," going on to boast, falsely, that he had fathered several children and grandchildren. Clearly, he protested too much. Yet Whitman must also have seen that his own way of legitimating male eros was crucially different from Symonds's. Symonds proposed thinking about men who loved men as "sexual inverts"—a special minority, almost biologically different from the norm. Whitman had dreamed of a world where eroticism would be freed up among all men, even if in the meantime it would be the special bond of certain initiates.

The difference involved Whitman's whole approach to morality. His writing is remarkable, from the first appearance of *Leaves of Grass*, for the energy it devotes to rearranging our hierarchies of value. Where Christianity places the soul above the body, for example, Whitman writes, in section 5 of "Song of Myself":

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself
 to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.

The next few lines address the soul as a lover—physical, even unmistakably sexual ("you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me . . ."). He insists on the fleshiness of spirit and the spiritual value of flesh. The paradoxical gesture is made so often, and so pointedly, that Whitman sometimes seems a prophet of the modern value on transgression for its own sake. But this is only half the picture. The body, after all, has not been placed above the soul. Antagonism, in Whitman, is always resolved into affirmation—affirmation not only of what has been devalued, but of everything that is: the honor of the despised, the beauty in ugliness, the vitality of death. His

revaluations might seem perverse, but he also wants us to see them as moral and encompassing. He needed a way to meet the Christian moral hierarchies directly, unblinkingly, with a better moral vision. The saintly Whitman emerges from that struggle, which is both an inner struggle and a social one.

The same section about the body and the soul concludes with a justly famous passage, in which orgasmic ecstasy and religious vision seem fused:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge
that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the
women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff and drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder,
mullein and poke-weed.

This passage is often described as a mystical vision. And so it is, in its way. But where we might expect the poet to ascend from the mundane to the heavenly, he does the opposite. The passage does not end with the sight of God. It continues, with gathering intensity, to the minutest details of the physical world. It is as though his eyes come gradually into focus. What other writer could have led us so compellingly from the heights of the universe to ants and weeds? Who else could have infused so much reverence in a word like "scabs"?

Much of Whitman's writing, notably in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," comes down to a radical and paradoxical idea, borrowed from stoic philosophy but with a new resonance in a Christian culture: that what is beautiful is mere existence. The last section of that poem addresses the world with a series of fits that sound very much like "Let there be light"; but in this case they command the world to be exactly as it already is: "Flow on, river! . . . Stand up, tall masts of Manna hatta! . . .

Throb, baffled and curious brain!" Whitman, full of affirmation that he is, does not seek to exonerate the world or redeem it. His attitude is fundamentally a refusal to see the world as in need of redemption. Indeed, there is more of the ugliness of the world in his poetry than in almost anyone else's before him (e.g., "The hiss of the surgeon's knife, the gnawing teeth of his saw, / Wheeze, cluck, swash of falling blood, short wild scream, and long, dull, tapering groan."). His project of finding beauty in mere existence allows him to get beyond the usual preference for the ideal over the actual, spirit over body. This dialectic is a constant source of movement organizing his verse. Whitman's writing is so comprehensive that one of his champions claimed there was no significant aspect of the universe that was not dealt with in *Leaves of Grass*. But it is very difficult to find a passage of any length that could be called pretty. As Randall Jarrell noted in a now classic essay, Whitman's lines exude a care for language that somehow does not distract us from the world they unblinkingly absorb. "The *thereness* and *suchness* of the world," he notes, "are incarnate in Whitman as they are in few other writers."¹¹

The attention to the body and to sex that Whitman achieved in this way represents a watershed in modern culture. Formerly, sexual desire had been seen as an appetite, or a sign of fallen nature, or the animal being against which moral humanity asserts itself, with institutions such as marriage being a kind of toilet-training for sexual desire. Whitman treats erotic life as a distinctive kind of experience, valuable because it is not controlled, allowing for a new mode of expressivity and self-discovery, to be approached with abandonment and respect. "Is this then a touch?" he asks, in one especially dense section of "Song of Myself," "quivering me to a new identity"? In Whitman, sex comes to be seen in a new way: as *sexuality*, a fundamental human capacity. He referred to his poems on this topic, especially "I Sing the Body Electric," as his "sexuality odes," and fiercely defended them against critics, nervous publishers, and censorious friends such as Emerson, all of whom pressed for their removal.

This new way of understanding sex is inseparable from Whit-

man's brand of individualism, which is often misunderstood. When he retitled his longest and most famous poem "Song of Myself," he created the misleading impression that he was celebrating a fixed and definite self, his own ego. But Whitman attaches the word "I" to so many situations (e.g., "My voice is the wife's voice, the screech by the rail of the stairs") that it is not finally defined by any of them, except in the almost exasperated comedy of that endless discovery of inner otherness. "I dote on myself," he writes, with often-forgotten humor; "there is that lot of me and all so luscious." Or again: "I resist anything better than my own diversity."

Whitman's individualism, like Emerson's, is paradoxical. It is often forgotten that Emerson, in "Self-Reliance," describes the "self-reliance" of his title as a poor way of speaking, since he meant to underscore not the self as an object to be relied upon, but the endlessly recreating and unknowable agent who does the relying. Self-reliance is a mode of becoming, or transition to a new state, a faith in the unknown persons we might soon be. In "The Poet," the lecture that Whitman heard in 1842, Emerson said, "every intellectual man quickly learns that, beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect, he is capable of a new energy . . . by abandonment to the nature of things." This instinct of metamorphosis, Emerson continued, was the special precinct of the poetic imagination, a higher version of the intoxicants that take us out of normal consciousness. Emersonian individualism, then, far from reconciling us to what we already are, is meant to be a continual revision. He thought it could not fail to conform to natural law, no matter how unpredictable.

Whitman took Emerson's faith in the metamorphic instinct a step further by turning it against the New Englander's creed of refinement, purity, and chastity. Sexuality—by breaking the frame of ordinary reality, heightening the senses, and dissolving public selfhood—restores a primordial, undifferentiated self, fully embodied and in contact with the world. It is a valuable dimension of selfhood partly because it is so foreign to the regulated framework of a self. Over and over, in the sexuality odes as in "Song of Myself" or "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whit-

man celebrates that in himself which is not quite himself, "the other I am." This extends far beyond sex, of course, but it helps to explain why sex is so central to Whitman's vision (though it sits oddly with the eugenic language of vigorous breeding that Whitman also relied on to validate sex).

In the fourth section of "Song of Myself," Whitman writes that his public, identifiable self—the kind that anyone would see in daily life—is not "the Me myself." "Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am . . . Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it." This passage has been taken as suggesting a mysterious inner self. Whitman might not have held to any metaphysical view of the "Me myself," however; he might have been trying to describe the inevitably divided nature of self-awareness. No matter what we are, we can always regard it with some distance. In "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," this "real Me" returns to mock the speaker, "with peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written." So it would appear to be less like the usual idea of the soul—as a higher entity with which we will one day become identical by shedding our mortal selves—than as an elusive horizon of transformation. Late in "Song of Myself," Whitman imagines himself as a germ of life endlessly reimbodied in the material recirculation of atoms through the ages. But here, too, he differs from the familiar versions of reincarnation, since he does not imagine a moral ladder of reward and punishment in different life-forms, let alone the common fantasy of an inner personality persisting from "past lives."

Given his commitment to affirming the world as it is, flawed and unredeemed, Whitman could hardly have imagined a greater test of his poetic vision than the Civil War. He often said in his later years that the Civil War had been the fountain-source of *Leaves of Grass*. He was greatly exaggerating. Most of his poems had been published by 1860. But the war gave him a severe proving ground for his distinctive vision. In 1862 he went to the Virginia front looking for his brother George, who had been wounded, and stayed in Washington, working at a series of clerk's jobs and attending wounded soldiers as a volunteer hospital visitor. An ardent Unionist, he soon came to de-

spise the war. *Drum-Taps*, the volume of poems he published separately in 1865 and later folded into *Leaves of Grass*, treats his ambivalence directly, in poems such as "The Wound-Dresser," forswearing the public rhetoric of heroism and glory in favor of a more complex attention—disturbing, graphic, and erotic at the same time—to the wounded and dying.

Drum-Taps, along with Herman Melville's *Battle-Pieces*, remains one of the strongest treatments of this or any other war. When Lincoln was assassinated in April of 1865, just after the volume appeared, Whitman added new poems to a second printing, including the elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd." Although the poem never names Lincoln, it establishes an intensely personal relation to the dead president, who remained Whitman's hero thereafter. Whitman had seen Lincoln several times; once, after glimpsing him in a crowded room, the poet-clerk went home and wrote in his notebook, "His face & manner have an expression & are inexpressibly sweet—one hand on his friend's shoulder, the other holds his hand. I love the president personally."

Whitman also later published prose sketches based on his wartime notebooks, first as *Memoranda During the War* in 1876, then in expanded form as *Specimen Days* in 1882. *Specimen Days* is a chaotic book, frequently apologetic for its fragmentary character, but its personal reflections have made it one of the most enduringly popular treatments of the war. Its first half, devoted to the war years, is moving and agreeably rambling. Readers have often felt a loss of momentum in the second half, which lacks a narrative and personal focus; it is omitted here.

After the war, Whitman revisited his early nationalist idealism. In ways that he only dimly recognized, the world had changed around him. In his youth, America was stamped by provincialism, regarded as an uncultured and crude aberration among nations. Whitman's nationalist ardor—and his poetic vocation—arose partly as a response to that intense sense of devaluation. After the war, the American market economy was entering a new phase, dominated by corporations and heavy

capital. The United States was also more and more set on an imperial course of its own. The Whitman who had been called by Thoreau "the greatest democrat the world has seen" evidently felt his optimism called into question by the war, by postwar corruption and the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, and by a tide of European critics—including Thomas Carlyle, who had been another of the young Whitman's heroes.

In this context, Whitman wrote a series of magazine articles in which he tried to put together a defense of the American experiment as he understood it, allowing "full play for human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions." The resulting book, *Democratic Vistas*, is a peculiar mix. It is in treatise form, yet without systematic argument. Whitman lacks Tocqueville's grasp of historical contradictions and seriously underestimates the structural character of anti-democratic tendencies. His distinctive generosity sometimes wavers in the face of Carlyle's antipopulism, and sometimes asserts itself all too naively. Yet *Democratic Vistas* remains an eloquent (if sometimes bombastic) statement of democratic national ideals, and has survived as a minor classic of political faith. It is especially remarkable for the role it gives to literature in forging the conditions of democratic life. In this it might be compared with Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), with which it is nearly contemporary.

In poetry, too, Whitman began to change the emphases of his national rhetoric. He had always celebrated America not just as a nation like any other, the way an Icelander might be fond of Iceland, but as a nation with a special mission, bringing democracy to all peoples. This supercharged nationalism was a potent but contradictory mix. It fed the arrogance of a redeemer nation, justifying American dominance and expansion. But it could also make possible a democratic transnationalism beyond the merely American. Both of these tendencies find expression in Whitman's verse, early and late. The later poetry, such as "Passage to India" or "Prayer of Columbus," broadens the poet's sense of the world, without abandoning his original vocation. Interestingly, some of the first major writers to see

themselves as followers of Whitman, including José Martí of Cuba and Fernando Pessoa of Portugal, were those who took him in this internationalist light. American writers of the twentieth century, by contrast, tend to see him as a national, essentially American writer.

Looking back on his earlier, more productive years, the aging Whitman often tried to summarize what he had been up to. He told the story in a different way each time. He once remarked that *Leaves of Grass* had been above all "a language experiment." He told a group of admirers in Canada that his main object all along had been "to sing, and sing to the full, the ecstasy of simple physiological Being." In "A Backward Glance," he says the point was what we would now call autobiographical: "to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America."

This volume brings together each of the forewords and afterwords that Whitman wrote for various editions of his poetry, allowing a unique overview of his shifting manifestos. Most famous among them is the preface to the 1855 version. Whitman later wrote that he never liked this preface. He claimed that he wrote it in haste, as the book was being set in type, neither planning it in advance nor revising as he went. Yet it is one of the most eloquent things he ever wrote, not only on his faith in democracy and America, but on his dramatic conception of an essentially modern poetry. The 1856 edition had no preface, but the open letter to Emerson covers much the same ground in a new, even more militant way. The editions of 1860 and 1867 contained nothing comparable, but when Whitman published "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free" separately in 1872, he wrote a new comprehensive preface—as he did again four years later for a new edition of his work. "A Backward Glance," first published in 1888, was retained as an afterword to the deathbed edition.

Notes

1. Unsigned review in the [London] *Examiner*, March 22, 1856, pp. 180–181.
2. Unsigned review in the *New York Daily Times*, November 13, 1856, p. 2.
3. *Ibid.*; and Rufus Griswold, review in *Criterion* 1, November 10, 1855, p. 24.
4. Unsigned review in *The Critic* [London], April 1, 1856, pp. 170–171.
5. [Walt Whitman], unsigned review in the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, September 29, 1855, p. 2.
6. Quoted in Jerome Loving, *Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 98.
7. Horace Traubel, ed., *Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols. (various publishers, 1901–1998), vol. 1, p. 223.
8. Richard Maurice Bucke, *Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1883), p. 31.
9. Griswold, *op. cit.*
10. Clara Barrus, *Whitman and Burroughs: Comrades* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), pp. 13, 17.
11. Randall Jarrell, "Some Lines from Whitman," in *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953).