

WALT WHITMAN
LEAVES OF GRASS



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WALT WHITMAN

Leaves of Grass



Edited with an Introduction by

JEROME LOVING

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INTRODUCTION

ON the copyright page to the present edition of *Leaves of Grass* (the last one prepared by the poet), it is stated that the second annex, 'Good-Bye My Fancy,' enjoys the same protection as that of the eight 'editions' of the book published between 1855 and 1891. Technically, only six editions were published during the poet's lifetime, and actually none of them was safe from pirating before 1891, the year of the first international copyright agreement. Not that *Leaves of Grass* was ever in much danger of being stolen by one of the European publishing houses. The first foreign edition—prepared in 1868 by the British critic William Michael Rossetti with Whitman's cooperation—had to be 'selected,' meaning expurgated. Now the whole of *Leaves of Grass*, plus two appendices and a retrospective essay, was safely published, if still not acceptable to the genteel standards of the time, in either the United States or Great Britain. The irony of the copyright protection is underscored by the fact that the Librarian of Congress, whose name appears on the copyright page, was A. R. Spofford, long suspected by Whitman and his friends to have been 'Sigma,' the anonymous author of an attack on the poet and his book in 1882. Calling Whitman's work 'a glorification of the animal man' in the *New York Tribune*, 'Sigma' attempted to qualify, if not deny, the assertion by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1855 that *Leaves of Grass* was 'the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America had yet contributed' to world literature. Rather, 'Sigma' argued, Emerson ultimately had come to view the book as fatally flawed by what he called a 'disgusting priapism.'

Although today it is Whitman's probable homosexuality that is often emphasized, in the nineteenth century it was largely his frank allusions to heterosexuality—'libidinous joys only' in the 'Children of Adam' sequence—that tended to focus the reader's attention on part instead of the whole

of *Leaves of Grass*. For Whitman, sex was an important part of the human experience celebrated in many of his poems. Yet it was also the part that got him into the most trouble with the critics of Victorian America who defended the 'standard of the evening lamp'—what used to be called the 'TV family viewing hour' in twentieth-century America. When Emerson first read *Leaves* in 1855, he chose to ignore the problem posed by the sexual references in such poems eventually entitled 'Song of Myself' and 'The Sleepers,' no doubt because sex was implicitly part of the nature he had praised in his own prose-poems, or essays, as 'part or parcel of God.' By 1860, however, when Whitman had travelled from New York to Boston to supervise the publication of the third, expanded, edition of his book, Emerson thought Whitman ought to censor himself a little in order to give the book a 'chance to be popularly seen, apprehended.' In response to this, Whitman asked as the two walked on Boston Common: 'You think that if I cut the book there would be a book left?' Whitman remembered the grave look on Emerson's face: 'This seemed to disturb him just a bit. Then he smiled at me and said, "I did not say as good a book—I said a good book."'¹

Emerson had more than a literary interest in the fortunes of *Leaves of Grass*. Immediately after reading his complimentary copy in 1855, he had written Whitman a letter in which he greeted the poet 'at the beginning of a great career.' Without securing Emerson's permission, Whitman in turn published his letter in the *New York Tribune* of 10 October 1855. The poet also included a copy of the letter as an appendix to his 1856 edition and adorned the spine of the book in gold letters with a prominent phrase from the letter, including Emerson's name. When Whitman ignored Emerson's advice in 1860 and went ahead with the publication of the third (unexpurgated) edition of his book, neither Emerson nor Whitman could have been surprised by the critical reaction. For example, the *Boston Post*, noting Emerson's association with the book, wrote: 'The most

¹ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York, 1914), III, p. 439.

charitable conclusion at which we can arrive is that both Whitman's *Leaves* and Emerson's laudation had a common origin in temporary insanity.' It was not, however, the allusions to physiology and sex alone that disturbed Whitman's critics but his bold departure in general from the rules of conventional poetry. He broke open the standard metered line, discarded the obligatory rhyme scheme, and freely expressed himself in the living vernacular of American speech:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer
grass.

In the original (1855) version of 'Song of Myself,' the first line read simply, 'I celebrate myself' and the untitled poem was called 'Walt Whitman' in most of the successive editions of *Leaves of Grass* until 1881, when the poet finally decided on the definitive arrangement and titles of his poems. In celebrating himself, 'a *Person*, a human being . . . in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century,' he spoke of all mankind as emblems of God. And the 'mankind' he celebrated specifically included women. Apparently, Whitman did not, like other writers before him, trust the utility of such general terms but insisted that the woman be named in his catalogs of what he called the 'divine average':

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man.

A number of women of the poet's day responded with enthusiasm, including, the Englishwoman Anne Gilchrist. The widow of Blake's biographer (who finished her husband's book and wrote several of her own as well) described Whitman in 'A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman' (1870) as 'the beloved friend of all [who] initiated for them a "new and superb friendship"; [he] whispered that secret of a god-like pride in a man's self, and

a perfect trust in woman, whereby their love for each other, no longer poisoned and stifled, but basking in the light of God's smile, and sending up to Him a perfume of gratitude, attains at last a divine and tender completeness.'

Part of Mrs Gilchrist's enthusiasm for *Leaves of Grass*, as the reader may suspect from the lushness of her prose, stemmed from the fact that she fell passionately in love with Whitman upon reading his book, immediately began what was at first a one-sided correspondence with the poet, and finally announced in 1876 her plan to come to America. Whitman hastily replied that he did not approve of her 'American trans-settlement.' Never personally (only poetically) comfortable with women outside their maternal roles, he had earlier tried to discourage her connubial affections by saying, 'You must not construct such an unauthorized and imaginary ideal Figure, and call it W. W. . . . The actual W. W. is a very plain personage, and entirely unworthy [of] such devotion.' Mrs Gilchrist ignored the distinction and relocated to Philadelphia, just across the river from Camden, New Jersey, where the poet was then living, only to discover the dramatic difference between the lusty poet of *Leaves of Grass* and the aging, semi-invalid author who had suffered his first paralytic stroke in 1873. They nevertheless became good friends during Gilchrist's stay in the United States, and by the time of her departure in 1879 she had no doubt understood the deeper meaning of Whitman's candor about himself. The personality dramatized in *Leaves of Grass* is best appreciated when we realize that Whitman wrote not exclusively about present actuality but about the Emersonian state of *becoming*. In the case of women, this meant their sexuality and ultimately their fecundity. What apparently attracted such female readers as Mrs Gilchrist was the poet's lifting of the veil of ladyhood to reveal their womanly vitality, their desire to become co-equal lovers (and partners) of man instead of objects of male sexual (and social) utility. 'Walt Whitman, the effeminate world needed thee,' wrote Sara Willis Parton, the American author of such popular books as *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (1853) and *Ruth Hall* (1855). 'I confess

I extract no poison from these "Leaves"—to me they have brought only healing.'

Whitman's egalitarian attitude towards women stemmed from his Jacksonian background in politics, yet he was never radical in his love for democracy, or what he called the 'good cause.' He would have never told the 'workers of the world' to unite but rather to preserve their identity as artisans in the New World of endless possibility. 'I have allow'd the stress of my poems from the beginning to end,' he declared in 'A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads,' 'to bear upon American individuality and assist it—not only because that is a great lesson in Nature, amid all her generalizing laws, but as counterpoise to the leveling tendencies of Democracy.' Whitman far preferred its *leavening* tendencies that produced an average that was 'divine' in its sense of Personality:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his
foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,
The married and unmarried children ride home to their
Thanks-giving dinner,
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a
strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and
harpoon are ready,
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of
the big wheel,
The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day
loafe and looks at the oats and rye . . .

And so the catalog goes for more than fifty additional lines to conclude: 'And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.' Americans were identified not only by what they did for a living but by the national consensus that they were bound together by their individuality as 'simple, separate' persons. To this contradiction, which still lies at the heart of American ideology, Whitman added the revised role of the

poet as the most representative person—'Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son.'

Whitman's poetic vision, of course, was not limited to Americans but extended to men, women, and children around the globe. This is seen more clearly in later poems, such as 'Passage to India' in which technological progress is the ostensible reason to celebrate the common cause of humanity on its 'Passage to more than India!' The poet's logocentrism, however, is tempered by the realistic detail of the nature he observes. Writing about his native city of New York as the 22-year-old editor of the *Aurora*, he was already aware of his country's representative reality: 'Here are people of all classes and stages of rank—from all countries on the globe—engaged in all the varieties of avocations—of every grade, every hue of ignorance and learning, morality and vice, wealth and want, fashion and coarseness, breeding and brutality, elevation and degradation, impudence and modesty.' Thirteen years later as the poet of *Leaves of Grass*, he envisaged himself as the macrocosm of the life he surveyed so tellingly:

Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

The message here is that the poet is totally American and America is totally representative of the divinity and humanity of men and women in countries around the world.

It was an audacious act to declare oneself so egotistically, to write—as Whitman did in 'Song of Myself'—that not only is he 'not curious about God' (because he beholds 'God in every object'), but he is not even curious about how there can be someone 'more wonderful than myself.' To try to understand Whitman's confidence, we must return to its source—to what Emerson called the 'long foreground' to *Leaves of Grass*. It might be said that Whitman had nothing but himself to celebrate in 1855. When Emerson wrote to him at the 'beginning' of his career as a poet, Whitman had already concluded—often unsuccessfully—careers as a carpenter, 'jour' (journeyman) printer, school teacher,

journalist, and construction speculator. The second of eight children born to an alcoholic father and a whining but loving mother, he had finished his formal schooling at the sixth grade (12-13 years). The family was often in economic difficulty and moved several times between the city of Brooklyn and the country around Huntington, Long Island. Whitman joined the work force early, no doubt to assist the care and feeding of his large family. Not long out of adolescence, he gradually replaced his father as the family patriarch. Ersatz though he was in the years preceding his father's death in 1855, he was apparently far superior to his father in the capacity to care. In an allegorical sketch published when Whitman was 25 but whose internal evidence suggests it was first drafted when he was 16, the future poet wrote: 'Though a bachelor, I have several girls and boys that I consider my own.' Although he calls the first girl Louisa, she is probably based on his older sister Mary Elizabeth, who, like her mother, grew up to marry an alcoholic. The other 'daughter' is more easily identified as his younger sister because his sketch of her anticipates the instability of her adult life, mainly as a hypochondriac. Describing Hannah Louisa as 'a very beautiful girl, in her fourteenth year,' Whitman notes that 'Flattery comes too often to her ears. From the depths of her soul I now and then see misty revealings of thought and wish, that are not well.' He continues the sketch by musing on the 'dreary thought' of 'what may happen, in the future years, to a handsome, merry child.' Unhappy as she was in her adult life, Hannah managed to outlive all her brothers and sisters—though Whitman was often distracted by reports about his sister's ill-fated marriage to an unsuccessful landscape painter.

Whitman's family of siblings was a microcosm of the society he would celebrate in his famous catalogs where, in democratic fashion, the president is named alongside the prostitute. The poet's eldest brother spent his last years in an asylum. The youngest brother spent his life mentally retarded and physically handicapped. A third brother died early of alcoholism and tuberculosis. Yet another Whitman

'son' became a successful civil engineer, a fifth brother became a Civil War hero, and of course the 'Elder Brother' himself became a famous poet. 'Elder Brother' is one of the poet's appellations for God. Another is 'camerado,' Whitman's own coinage. His relationship to God was of the same kind he bore to his own brothers and sisters. Not the Heavenly Father that Emily Dickinson addressed so ironically, God was 'In the faces of men and women . . . and in my own face in the glass.' Indeed, the poet addresses God as a big brother who is always approachable:

Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a
minute longer.)

Like God, the poet was 'both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it'—the 'Father' who was also the brother.

Whitman was, as he declared himself, 'the poet of the Body' and 'the poet of the Soul.' He contradicted the Transcendentalist or American Romantic concept of nature as the 'Not-me'—that is, in the Neoplatonic sense of nature as merely the emblem of God. It might be said that Whitman's 'transcendentalism' was less discursive than Emerson's, more mystical, because the persona of 'Song of Myself' never sacrifices the body for the soul but always wakes up to the sense of both. His transcendental experience began *and ended* with the mating of Body and Soul, best exemplified in the often-noted Section Five of 'Song of Myself.' 'Loafe with me on the grass,' beckons the flesh to the spirit,

. . . loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or
lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.
I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer
morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently
turn'd over upon me,

And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged
your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you
held my feet.

The conclusion to this dream of God in the flesh is that the poet now knows 'that the hand of God is the promise of my own' and 'the spirit of God is the brother of my own.'

In *Nature* (1836) Emerson had called the Understanding, or empirical reasoning, 'the Hand of the mind' to distinguish it from Reason, which he considered intuitive and transcendent of material objects. In calling the 'hand of God' the 'promise' of his own existence in the mind of God, Whitman undermines his own contradiction to Transcendentalism with regard to the equality of Body and Soul. Caught in the inconsistency, he might have said—as he does at the close of 'Song of Myself'—that he is 'large' and contains 'multitudes' of contrary beliefs which are themselves resolved in the Final Analysis. Yet Whitman does contradict himself here, and it may be the first sign of his gradual coming into line with the logocentrism that characterizes much of American literature in the nineteenth century. Whitman's most original poetry (and thought), therefore, is to be found largely in the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* (1855, 1856, 1860). The poet no doubt suspected as much when he established his definitive arrangement, which attempts to distribute the strongest poems somewhat evenly throughout the 422 pages of poetry. The edition opens with 'Inscriptions,' which consists of many post-1860 poems, then moves into the 'Paumanok' poems of 1860, which in turn take us into the heart of his book, 'Song of Myself.' This long poem, America's first in terms of Yankee originality, is followed mainly by poems first published in 1860 but written during Whitman's five-year period of greatest creativity, 1855–60.

Leaves of Grass in its final rendering is structured to reflect the poet's life. In old age he likened the book to a carefully constructed cathedral, but of course it developed by the fits and starts of a life that was naturally episodic. It is the

rearrangement of such episodes that gives the book its thematic balance. Beginning with 'One's-Self I Sing' and ending with 'Good-Bye My Fancy,' the final ordering paces the life through its many climaxes and convulsions—through the heights of 'Song of Myself' to the crisis poems of 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' and 'As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life.' It is in these latter seashore poems that Whitman begins to question the poet's ability to use language to break through to God (though in later poems still he resumes the Emersonian confidence in poetry but without the earlier, Whitmanian, originality). They are strategically placed between poems reflecting two traumatic periods in Whitman's personal life, the loneliness of the years 1857–60 when he sought personal love, and the Civil War, when the poet witnessed the carnage of his 'divine average.' In 'Calamus' he tells of 'the secret of my nights and days' as a frequently unrequited lover. These poems speak of Adhesiveness, a phrenological term Whitman employed to describe male relationships (whereas the 'Children of Adam' sequence, which precedes them, celebrates Amativeness, or heterosexual relationships). The 'Calamus' poems are deeply personal and are the most frequently cited evidence of Whitman's homoerotic tendencies. It is in *Drum-Taps*, however, that we find poems that reflect more directly on the poet's interaction with men, generally younger men whom he would come to as he did his siblings—as father and brother. Indeed, few of the numberless wounded and sick soldiers Whitman visited daily in the Washington hospitals during and after the war were aware that the prematurely gray man (called 'The Good Gray Poet' in a pamphlet defending *Leaves of Grass* against censorship in the 1860s) was a poet. Poets in those days dressed like other gentlemen, in black suits; whereas Whitman's casual western attire suggested a retired sea captain or frontier scout. Yet 'wound dresser' (and government worker) by day, Whitman was a poet at night and produced his volume of war poems in 1866. In poems from 'Beat! Beat! Drums!' to 'Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night' and 'A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray

and Dim,' he reflects on both the war's early excitement and its ultimate pathos.

It is often noted, however, that *Drum-Taps* (first published separately) lacks the spontaneity and personal involvement of the earlier poetry. Whitman had been involved in the war, but he had not witnessed any battles. Actually, he visited only two battlefields after the events, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville; his experience came through the war's bloody consequences, which he mainly encountered in the wartime hospitals. As a result, the 'Drum-Taps' poems are perhaps the work of a (somewhat) distanced observer—of someone who comes to the experience after the fact and must somehow make a new sense of it. This detachment, however, tends to vanish in the 'Sequel' to the volume, a series written and hastily added to the book after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln on 14 April 1865. In the poem which makes the 'Sequel' so memorable, 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,' Whitman attained the rank of Milton and Shelley as master of the elegy. Unlike his British precursors in *Lycidas* and *Adonais*, Whitman did not personally know the subject of his poetic lament; yet he had long admired Lincoln (who had been a reader of *Leaves of Grass*) and immediately grasped the symbolic importance for America of his sudden passing. Indeed, in death Lincoln came alive to signify the terrific cost the American people had paid for the institution of slavery:

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the
war.

As in any great elegy, the poet reconciles the personal death of Lincoln with the public life his subject now represents. Yet Whitman's *personal* regard for the slain president is what makes the poem almost as compelling as the earlier, more egocentric poems.

Whitman may have viewed Lincoln as the political equivalent of the American Poet he had both invented and sought to personify. In any event, he wrote three other

poems on the slain president and, beginning in 1879, delivered a public lecture every year on the anniversary of the assassination. The most famous of these poems—and still Whitman's best-known poem—is 'O Captain! My Captain!' Written in conventional meter and rhyme, it is uncharacteristic of the poet's style. It was also the favorite of his family members (none of whom ever fully appreciated the originality of Whitman's 'language experiment'), and Whitman ultimately regretted having written it because it took attention away from his more original work. If the Lincoln lecture was also popular, it must have been for its content and not for its delivery. It has been said of the poet that he wrote 'barrels' of lectures in his early manhood and thought later in his career of becoming a professional lecturer. The reality, however, is that Whitman was a mediocre public speaker at best. A close friend recorded that whenever Whitman read or spoke in public, he gave an artificial delivery in a high-pitched voice not characteristic of his more natural, conversational style. This is surprising when we consider the strong oratorical element in the poetry. What distinguishes Whitman's verse from that of his precursors, even from Emerson, whose octosyllabic line reflected Oliver Wendell Holmes's theory that periodicity in poetry is determined by human respiration, is that its speech-act breaks free of the convention of formal writing, or literature, altogether. The colloquial nature allows for a freedom that transcends even Emerson's call in 'The Poet' for an American bard who 'is inflamed and carried away by his thought.' But Whitman put it best in an anonymous puff for the 1855 *Leaves*. He called himself 'An American bard at last! One of the roughs, large, proud, affectionate, eating, drinking, and breeding, his costume manly and free, his face sunburnt and bearded, his postures strong and erect, his *voice* bringing hope and prophecy to the generous races of young and old' (my italics).

Speech was the 'twin' of his vision, and thus the poetry is best appreciated when read aloud—out loud, if not out of doors. As a character out of the tradition of the American Tall Tale, the narrator is half-body, half-soul; but it is the

body that animates the soul, not vice-versa. Before Whitman, American poetry had cherished too much the soul. From Anne Bradstreet's 'The Flesh and the Spirit' to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 'Nature', as well as Emerson's *Nature*, the body was the 'unregenerate' part, at best the child of Mother Nature and not God the Father. It was more than a Transcendentalist emblem to Whitman, whose poetry transcends the metaphysical, as it were, to come full circle in the fashion of the life cycle he celebrates. It is the *spoken* word that Whitman writes, 'Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.' As noted earlier, this line is addressed to the soul, but the narrator insists that the spirit become as physical as the flesh. 'Lack one lacks both,' he announces. 'The unseen is proved by the seen, / Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.' Although many of his poems underwent several title changes, the name of his book never changed. The grass was not only the emblem, or 'handkerchief of the Lord,' but also evidence of the never-ending cycle of nature:

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.

His book, then, literally *leaves* of grass, was a physical object in a sense that perhaps only a former printer could so appreciate. Whitman not only wrote the poems but set the type for part of the first edition. The manuscript, as he told a friend in old age, went to the 'ragman,' but the book went into the cycle of successive editions throughout his lifetime. Every time it went out of print, Whitman put out another, sometimes to cancel out the previous edition whose cycle was ready for renewal.

Whitman intended *Leaves of Grass* as a gift to the reader, something physical (and sensual) as well as thoughtful. Whereas the 1855 edition was a thin quarto, the 1856 edition was a smaller, 16mo volume, if also thicker, perhaps

to allow the ideal reader to carry the volume around, to read it while pausing from work, or to take it to the seashore where Whitman claimed to have first read Emerson. Largely self-taught, the poet did not want the cultural veil of 'book learning' to come between himself and his reader. 'Take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men,' he advised in his 1855 Preface. '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.' Whitman himself did not much enjoy the company of literary people (and in some circles the feeling was mutual because of the seemingly brash, untutored language and style of *Leaves of Grass*). His friends were not exclusively the 'roughs' he wrote about but included educated people who loved literature more than literary matters. Yet the intimate associations were with the 'powerful uneducated persons'—omnibus drivers, Civil War veterans (from both sides), and printers' 'devils.' Mainly, these individuals were men younger than himself and unmarried, but the relationships often extended to their relatives, whose familial associations simulated his own large family background. This affinity to the family that Whitman, a lifelong bachelor, never had for himself may account for the fact that he addressed his readers as siblings:

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?

It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is
eternal life—it is Happiness.

Although the detail in *Leaves of Grass* is realistic, its message is highly idealistic, expressing the Cartesian duality that fades in the twentieth century with American modernism and certainly postmodernism. Today critics prefer to emphasize his demographic pluralism, which included African-Americans (a topic virtually ignored by every other major American writer of the period, with the exception of Herman Melville and Mark Twain). While some of Whitman's lines have been 'deconstructed' into statements relating to race, class, and gender, the whole of