

a reader's guide to
**WALT
WHITMAN**

by Gay Wilson Allen



OCTAGON BOOKS
A DIVISION OF
FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
NEW YORK, 1975

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Reprinted 1971

Second Octagon Printing, 1973

Third Octagon Printing, 1975

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A DIVISION OF FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX, INC.

19 Union Square West

New York, N. Y. 10003

ISBN-0 374-90147-3

Manufactured by Braun-Brumfield, Inc.

Ann Arbor, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

Preface

In the early 1940s when I tried to find a publisher for a handbook on Walt Whitman, no commercial firm was interested. One, which had published handbooks on several major British authors, said it was ridiculous to think of publishing a handbook for an American poet. An amateur publisher, Walter Hendricks, accepted the manuscript for Packard and Company, then in Chicago. I am grateful to him for giving life to that work, but the distribution problems have been vexing. Five commercial publishers have inquired about bringing out a revised edition, but I have not been able to get my original contract revised, or to control the reprinting of the work, which has twice been reissued without corrections or revisions. This is the reason I have not kept the *Walt Whitman Handbook* up to date.

But even if the *Handbook* could be revised now, there would be problems. Every chapter not only is out of date, bibliograph-

ically and critically, but was written from the point of view of Whitman scholarship in the 1940 decade. Whitman was then well established in the academic world, but few major American poets or critics thought highly of him. All that changed a decade later, about the time of the celebration of the centennial of *Leaves of Grass* in 1955. The late Randall Jarrell probably did more than anyone else to rescue him from his misunderstood poetic reputation. Of course, not all of *Leaves of Grass* is now accepted as great poetry; in fact, critics have become more discriminating between the mediocre poems and Whitman's masterpieces.

In writing this Reader's Guide I have tried to give some idea of the enormous change in critical attitude toward Whitman, and some of the first critical reactions to *Leaves of Grass* are today both amusing and instructive. I have not attempted to give a condensed biography, but to indicate the more important biographical facts which help to explain the poems. On Whitman's literary theory and practice, a great deal more could be said—in fact, I have said a great deal elsewhere—but I have limited my discussion to what seemed to be most pertinent. If my preference for the term "Expressive Form" instead of the more familiar "Organic Form" is understood, I think it may prove helpful in appreciating the aesthetics and mechanics of Whitman's poems.

This book is intended as *an introduction* to intelligent reading and study of Whitman, not as an exhaustive analysis or definitive critical evaluation. I have particularly tried to indicate that the latter is still changing, and have summarized and commented upon the most recent attempts to interpret Whitman's poems in the contexts of Vedanticism, Existentialism, and psychoanalysis. So long as Whitman is read, critics will find new approaches to him; this is a test of his vitality. And he has never looked healthier than in this year of his sesquicentennial.

Oradell, N.J.
May 1969

G. W. A.

Chronology

- 1819 Born May 31 at West Hills, near Huntington, Long Island.
- 1823 May 27, Whitman family moves to Brooklyn.
- 1825-30 Attends public school in Brooklyn.
- 1830 Office boy for doctor, lawyer.
- 1830-34 Learns printing trade.
- 1835 Printer in New York City until great fire August 12.
- 1836-38 Summer of 1836, begins teaching at East Norwich, Long Island; by winter 1837-38 has taught at Hempstead, Babylon, Long Swamp, and Smithtown.
- 1838-39 Edits *Long Islander*, weekly newspaper, at Huntington.
- 1840-41 Autumn 1840, campaigns for Van Buren; then teaches school at Trimming Square, Woodbury, Dix Hills, and Whitestone.
- 1841 May, goes to New York City to work as printer in *New World* office; begins writing for *Democratic Review*.
- 1842 Spring, edits *Aurora*, daily newspaper, in New York City; edits *Evening Tatler* for short time.
- 1845-46 August, returns to Brooklyn, writes for Brooklyn *Evening Star* (daily) and *Long Island Star* (weekly) until March 1846.
- 1846-48 From March 1846 to January 1848, edits Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*; February 1848, goes to New Orleans to work on the *Crescent*; leaves May 27 and returns via Mississippi and Great Lakes.
- 1848-49 September 9, 1848, to September 11, 1849, edits Brooklyn *Freeman*, a "free soil" newspaper.
- 1850-54 Operates printing office and stationery store; does freelance journalism; builds and speculates in houses.
- 1855 Early July, *Leaves of Grass* is printed by Rome Brothers in Brooklyn; father dies July 11.
- 1856 Writes for *Life Illustrated*; publishes second edition of *Leaves of Grass* in summer and writes "The Eighteenth Presidency!"
- 1857-59 From spring of 1857 to about summer of 1859, edits the Brooklyn *Times*; unemployed, winter of 1859-60, frequents Pfaff's bohemian restaurant.
- 1860 March, goes to Boston to see third edition of *Leaves of Grass* through the press.
- 1861 April 12, Civil War begins; George Whitman enlists.

- 1862 December, goes to Fredericksburg, Virginia, scene of recent battle in which George was wounded; stays in camp two weeks.
- 1863 Remains in Washington, D.C., working part time in Army Paymaster's Office; visits soldiers in hospitals.
- 1864 Mid-June, returns to Brooklyn because of illness.
- 1865 January 24, appointed clerk in Department of Interior, returns to Washington; meets Peter Doyle; witnesses Lincoln's second inauguration; Lincoln assassinated April 14; May, *Drum-Taps* is printed; June 30, is discharged from position by Secretary James Harlan but re-employed next day in Attorney General's Office; autumn, prints *Drum-Taps and Sequel*, containing "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."
- 1866 William D. O'Connor publishes *The Good Gray Poet*.
- 1867 John Burroughs publishes *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person*; July 6, William Rossetti publishes article on Whitman's poetry in London *Chronicle*; "Democracy" (part of *Democratic Vistas*) published in December *Galaxy*.
- 1868 William Rossetti's *Poems of Walt Whitman* (selected and expurgated) published in England; "Personalism" (second part of *Democratic Vistas*) in May *Galaxy*; second issue of fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass* with *Drum-Taps and Sequel* added.
- 1869 Mrs. Anne Gilchrist reads Rossetti edition and falls in love with the poet.
- 1870 July, is very depressed for unknown reasons; prints fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and *Democratic Vistas* and *Passage to India*, all dated 1871.
- 1871 September 3, Mrs. Gilchrist's first love letter; September 7, reads "After All Not to Create Only" at opening of American Institute Exhibit in New York City.
- 1872 June 26, reads "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free" at Dartmouth College commencement.
- 1873 January 23, suffers paralytic stroke; mother dies May 23; unable to work, stays with brother George in Camden, New Jersey.
- 1874 "Song of the Redwood-Tree" and "Prayer of Columbus."
- 1875 Prepares Centennial edition of *Leaves of Grass* and *Two Rivulets* (dated 1876).
- 1876 Controversy in British and American press over America's neglect of Whitman; spring, begins recuperation at Stafford Farm, at Timber Creek; September, Mrs. Gilchrist arrives and rents house in Philadelphia.

- 1877 January 28, gives lecture on Tom Paine in Philadelphia; during summer gains strength by sun-bathing at Timber Creek.
- 1878 Spring, too weak to give projected Lincoln lecture; but in June visits J. H. Johnson and John Burroughs in New York.
- 1879 April 14, first lecture on Lincoln in New York; September, makes trip to Colorado, long visit with brother Jeff in St. Louis.
- 1880 January, returns to Camden; summer, visits Dr. R. M. Bucke in London, Ontario.
- 1881 April 15, gives Lincoln lecture in Boston; returns to Boston in late summer to read proof of *Leaves of Grass*, being published by James R. Osgood; poems receive final arrangement in this edition.
- 1882 Osgood ceases to distribute *Leaves of Grass* because District Attorney threatens prosecution unless the book is expurgated; publication is resumed by Rees Welsh in Philadelphia, who also publishes *Specimen Days and Collect*; both books transferred to David McKay, Philadelphia.
- 1883 Dr. Bucke publishes *Walt Whitman*, biography written with poet's co-operation.
- 1884 Buys house on Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey. will not be "house-tied"; November 29, Mrs. Gilchrist dies.
- 1885 In poor health; friends buy a horse and phaeton so that the poet will not be "house-tied"; November 29, Mrs. Gilchrist dies.
- 1886 Gives Lincoln lecture in Philadelphia.
- 1887 Gives Lincoln lecture in New York; is sculptured by Sidney Morse, painted by Herbert Gilchrist, J. W. Alexander, Thomas Eakins.
- 1888 Horace Traubel raises funds for doctors and nurses; *November Boughs* printed; money sent from England.
- 1889 Last birthday dinner, proceedings published in *Camden's Compliments*.
- 1890 Writes angry letter to J. A. Symonds, dated August 19, denouncing Symonds' interpretation of "Calamus" poems; claims six illegitimate children.
- 1891 *Good-Bye My Fancy* is printed, and the final edition of *Leaves of Grass* (dated 1891-92).
- 1892 Dies March 26; buried in Harleigh Cemetery, Camden, New Jersey.

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A Reader's Guide to Walt Whitman

I MAN OR BEAST?

What Centaur have we here, half man, half beast, neighing defiance to all the world?

—New York *Daily Times*, 1856

1

After a century of strangely contradictory abuse and worship, *Leaves of Grass* finally by the middle of the twentieth century attained almost universal acceptance as America's greatest single book of poems. Not all critics rank Walt Whitman as the first of American poets, but he is almost invariably named as one of the two or three best this country has produced—and frequently as *the* best. But for this very reason it is more difficult today to read Whitman's poems with the excitement they gave his first readers, who thought they were without precedent in literature. Someone has remarked that the greatest works of art have to create their own audiences, which is to say their own criteria for judgment; it is only the mediocre work of art that wins immediate acceptance—and then is usually soon forgotten. Of course, this observation is not always true,

but many examples can be found in sculpture, painting, music, and literature to support it.

The curious thing about *Leaves of Grass* is that none of its early readers was indifferent. They either hated it or were fascinated by it (sometimes both at the same time), and either reviled or immoderately praised the poet. In this respect he was like the "revolutionary" leaders in American politics: Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, and the two Roosevelts, who were adored by their followers and irrationally hated by those opposed to their politics and actions. This was so true of Whitman in his lifetime that it is still difficult to get two critics to agree about him, even though they both admire his poems. Since no reader today can be entirely uninfluenced by Whitman's reputation, either as man or as poet, it is difficult to read his poems without some bias, to have a completely honest response to them. For this reason it is instructive to see the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* through the eyes of its first critics.

The book entitled *Leaves of Grass*, a thin quarto of ninety-five pages bound in green cloth elaborately embossed with flower designs, was first advertised for sale on July 6, 1855.¹ The title page bore no name either of author or of publisher but gave the place as Brooklyn, N.Y. In the technical sense, it had not been "published," having been printed at the author's own expense by friends of his in Brooklyn. The frontispiece was a well-executed steel engraving, made from a good daguerreotype photograph, of a young man with a short beard prematurely tinged with gray, wearing a heavy black hat slightly pushed back on his tilted head, posing in shirt sleeves, with shirt open at the collar, revealing the top of his red-flannel undershirt, his right hand resting on his hip and his left hand thrust into his work-jeans pocket. The posture was both nonchalantly informal

and self-assured. This was evidently the author of the anonymous book (identified only on the copyright page as Walter Whitman). To understand how this frontispiece could shock anyone, it should be remembered that this was a period of formal dress (think of Lincoln only a few years later in his stovepipe hat and long-tailed coat) and dignified manners in literary circles: the "gentle" and gentlemanly Longfellow was America's favorite poet of this period—and one of Queen Victoria's favorites in England, too.

Putnam's Monthly, the leading literary magazine of the time, carried an anonymous review of *Leaves of Grass* in its September number. The reviewer, later revealed as Edward Everett Hale,² a Unitarian minister in Boston and future author of *Man Without a Country*, began:

Our account of last month's literature would be incomplete without some notice of a curious and lawless collection of poems, called *Leaves of Grass*, and issued in a thin quarto without the name of the publisher or author. The poems, twelve in number, are neither in rhyme nor blank verse, but in a sort of excited prose broken into lines without any attempt at measure or regularity, and, as many readers will perhaps think, without any idea of sense or reason. The writer's scorn for the wonted usages of good writing extends to the vocabulary he adopts; words usually banished from polite society are here employed without reserve and with perfect indifference to their effect on the reader's mind; and not only is the book one not to be read aloud to a mixed audience, but the introduction of terms never before heard or seen, and of slang expressions, often renders an otherwise striking passage altogether laughable.³

The review then quotes from Whitman's preface to illustrate his theory of expression, which asserted: "Nothing is better

than simplicity . . . To speak in literature, with the perfect recititude and the insouciance of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods, is the flawless triumph of art." This theory of "simplicity" aroused mixed emotions in the reviewer:

The application of these principles, and of many others equally peculiar which are expounded in a style equally oracular throughout the long preface,—is made *passim*, and often with comical success, in the poems themselves, which may briefly be described as a compound of the New England transcendentalism and New York rowdy. A fireman or omnibus driver, who had intelligence enough to absorb the speculations of that school of thought which culminated at Boston some fifteen or eighteen years ago, and resources of expression to put them forth again in a form of his own, with sufficient self-conceit and contempt for public taste to affront all usual propriety of diction, might have written this gross yet elevated, this superficial yet profound, this preposterous yet somehow fascinating book. As we say, it is a mixture of Yankee transcendentalism and New York rowdiness, and, what must be surprising to both these elements, they here seem to fuse and combine with the most perfect harmony. The vast and vague conceptions of the one, lost nothing of their quality in passing through the coarse and odd intellectual medium of the other, while there is an original perception of nature, a manly brawn, an epic directness in our new poet, which belong to no other adept of the transcendental school.⁴

In this second paragraph especially, the Reverend Mr. Hale shrewdly perceived Whitman's indebtedness to Emerson, which had yet not hampered his virile originality. The reviewer gives no indication that he is aware that Emerson had written the poet a few weeks earlier, congratulating him on "the most

extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed." Emerson had found in it "courage of treatment" and "large perception," and greeted the poet "at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start."

A second major review was published in the January number of the *North American Review*, a magazine of limited circulation but of considerable prestige in New England. Although the review was not signed, it was written by Charles Eliot Norton,⁵ later to win fame as professor of art at Harvard and translator of Dante. We would expect him to be shocked by *Leaves of Grass*, and he was, but it was also, in Poe's phrase made famous by Edmund Wilson, "the shock of recognition".⁶

Everything about the external arrangement of this book was odd and out of the way. The author printed it himself, and it seems to have been left to the winds of heaven to publish it. So it happened that we had not yet discovered it before our last number [the NAR was a quarterly], although we believe the sheets had then passed the press. It bears no publisher's name, and, if the reader goes to a bookstore for it, he may expect to be told at first, as we were, that there is no such book, and has not been. Nevertheless, there is such a book, and it is well worth going twice to the bookstore to buy it. Walt Whitman, an American—one of the roughs,—no sentimentalist,—no stander above men and women, or apart from them,—no more modest than immodest [see "Song of Myself," sec. 11] has tried to write down here, in a sort of prose poetry, a good deal of what he has seen, felt, and guessed at in a pilgrimage of some thirty-five years. He has a horror of conventional language of any kind.⁷

Norton then quotes Whitman's "theory of expression" from the Preface, and remarks that though other men have said this,

"generally it is the introduction to something more artistic than ever,—more conventional and strained. . . . In this book, however, the prophecy is fairly fulfilled in the accomplishment":

"... What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me. . . ."

So truly accomplished is this promise,—which anywhere else would be a flourish of trumpets,—that this quarto deserves its name. That is to say, one reads and enjoys the freshness, simplicity, and reality of what he reads . . . the book is a collection of observations, speculations, memories, and prophecies, clad in the simplest, truest, and often the most nervous English,—in the midst of which the reader comes upon something as much out of place as a piece of rotten wood would be among leaves of grass in the meadow, if the meadow had no object but to furnish a child's couch . . .

For the purpose of showing that he is above every conventionalism, Mr. Whitman puts into the book one or two lines which he would not address to a woman nor to a company of men. There is not anything, perhaps, which modern usage would stamp as more indelicate than are some passages in Homer. There is not a word in it meant to attract readers by its grossness, as there is in half the literature of the last century, which holds its place unchallenged on the tables of our drawing-rooms. For all that, it is a pity that a book where everything else is natural should go out of the way to avoid the suspicion of being prudish.⁸

Though Charles Eliot Norton is too refined to say so, he is disturbed by the frankly sexual references and descriptions in the book, for one of Whitman's major themes was that sex is pure and wholesome because it is natural. That there may have been secret causes for Whitman's passionate desire to defend

sexuality need not concern us at the moment; the important point is that educated and refined men like Charles Eliot Norton and Edward Everett Hale (Emerson too, as later developed) were irresistibly attracted by the vividness, originality, and power of Whitman's literary expression in his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, but they *did wish* the poet had not so blatantly made himself the medium of "forbidden voices":

Voices of sexes and lusts . . . voices veiled, and
I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured.

I do not press my finger across my mouth,
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around
the head and heart,
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing hearing and feeling are miracles, and each
part and tag of me is a miracle.

Divine am I 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.

If I worship any particular thing it shall be some
of the spread of my body;
Translucent mould of me it shall be you,
Shaded ledges and rests, firm masculine coulters,
it shall be you,
Whatever goes to the tilth of me it shall be you,
You my rich blood, your milky stream pale strippings
of my life;
Breast that presses against other breasts it shall be you,