



Jerome Loving

WALT
WHITMAN

THE SONG OF HIMSELF

WALT WHITMAN

THE SONG OF HIMSELF



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

© 1999 by
The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Loving, Jerome, 1941–
Walt Whitman : the song of himself / Jerome Loving.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-520-21427-7 (alk. paper)
1. Whitman, Walt, 1819–1892. 2. Poets, American—19th century—
Biography. I. Title.
PS3231.L68 1999
811'.3—dc21
[B] 98-29647
CIP

Printed in the United States of America
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standards for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

PREFACE



During Walt Whitman's lifetime, his poetry was generally reviled, condemned by reviewers as obscene in content, deficient in diction, irregular in rhythm, and absent of rhyme. In a final review of *Leaves of Grass* published on March 28, 1892, in the same issue that carried the poet's obituary, the *New York Times* declared that Whitman could not be called "a great poet unless we deny poetry to be an art." Today the *Times*—reflecting the opinion of literate America and the rest of the world—would probably consider Whitman the inventor of modern American poetry. The author of six ever-expanding editions of *Leaves of Grass*, he is now known as the "Poet of Democracy," who introduced freer, speechlike rhythms into the poetry of fixed verse and replaced its themes of New England villages and sentimental love with songs about occupations and sexuality.

Between the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass* and the last in 1881, and in the poems that made up the two Annexes in 1888 and 1891, Whitman experimented with the American vernacular as it enclosed and showcased the American experience directly before, during, and after the Civil War. Having written conventional poetry in the 1840s, he finally broke into free verse to celebrate not merely "Mother Nature" but his own nature as representative of all humankind in its endless variety. In doing so, he put on record a personality that has enthralled readers and influenced almost every major poet of the twentieth century—from Ezra Pound to Galway Kinnell. From the very be-

ginning, William Carlos Williams observed in the centenary year of the first *Leaves*, Whitman's book "enunciated a shocking truth, that the common ground is of itself a poetic source." Or as Whitman wrote in "Song of Myself" (capitalizing the pronoun to invoke a spiritual identity): "What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me."

Since 1883 there have been approximately fifteen formal biographies of America's most comprehensive poet. The first Whitman practically wrote himself when he "critiqued" Richard Maurice Bucke's draft of *Walt Whitman*. Three were written by Frenchmen, another three by Englishmen, and one by a Canadian. Another, by Emory Holloway, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1926. The standard biography, no longer in print, is *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* by Gay Wilson Allen. Published more than forty years ago, it has become out of date because of manuscript discoveries and recent scholarship. In fact, the current post-New Critical approaches suggest that when Whitman created the body of poetry that so dramatically and irrevocably changed the American literary landscape, he was not so "solitary" (culturally speaking) as had been assumed. Three important biographies have appeared since Allen's: Justin Kaplan's *Walt Whitman: A Life* (1980); Paul Zweig's *Walt Whitman: The Making of a Poet* (1984); and David S. Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (1995). All three make unique contributions to our appreciation of the poet, yet none of them goes significantly beyond the basic facts of the life as established in *The Solitary Singer*.

Inspired by Whitman centennial celebrations around the world in 1992, I set out to build on my own Whitman studies of the previous twenty years by writing a new critical biography based in part on previously unknown archival evidence and informed by the last forty years of scholarship. One of Whitman's earlier biographers wrote that the chronicler of the life of this poet had to be wealthy because of all the travel necessary for consulting manuscripts in private hands, but today, with most of Whitman's papers gathered in the Library of Congress and other major university archives, that biographer has now only to be rich in friends who know Whitman biography and its vast scholarship intimately. I was fortunate to have several of these benefactors. Ed Folsom, editor of the

Walt Whitman Quarterly Review and author of several books on Whitman, read my chapters as they were turned out and offered invaluable advice. Reading along with Folsom was Roger Asselineau of the Sorbonne, the author of *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, published more than thirty years ago, as well as countless articles on the poet. I am deeply indebted to Professors Folsom and Asselineau for their generosity in this and other projects. A third giant of Whitman studies who assisted me is Edwin Haviland Miller, who—among many other impressive scholarly achievements—has impeccably edited the *Correspondence of Walt Whitman*. Professor Miller, always helpful with advice, also read my manuscript and made available several rare Whitman volumes from his library. And one other person loomed large in my first circle of advisors: Robert D. Richardson, Jr., who has written celebrated biographies about two of Whitman's closest compatriots in making literature fit for a democracy, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Many others known for their work on Whitman also helped. Martin G. Murray and M. Wynn Thomas critiqued the chapters on the Civil War. I am in debt to Joel Myerson, not only for loaning me his microfilm collection of the Whitman papers at the Library of Congress but for his excellent descriptive bibliography of the poet. Alice Lotvin Birney of the Manuscript Division helped me get to the Whitman collections at the Library of Congress that were not available on microfilm. This biography probably could not have been written in Texas without the primary textual and manuscript resources of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. For years of friendly assistance there I thank Jake Baxter, Ken Craven, and Pat Fox as well as its director, Thomas F. Staley, and curator John Kirkpatrick. Virginia L. Close of the Dartmouth College Library helped me find new evidence about Whitman's visit to the college in 1872. Others who assisted in one way or another are Dennis Berthold, Louis J. Budd, Jennifer Chenoweth, William Bedford Clark, James M. and Marguerite Cox, Sonja Geerling, M.D., Claude Gibson, Sally Wofford Girand, Arthur Golden, Terence Hoagwood, William Innes Homer, Young Min Hyun, Justin Kaplan, M. Jimmie Killingsworth, Joann P. Krieg, Clinton Machann, John J. McDermott, Kathleen McGinn, the late DeWolfe Miller, J. Lawrence Mitchell, Dan Osterman, Geneva Phillips,

Angel Price, Kenneth M. Price, David S. Reynolds, Paul Salvesson, Emily Sturgess, Joan Templeton, Paul Van Riper, Marion Alcaro Walker, and James L. W. West III. Much more “long-distance” research was conducted through the office of Inter-Library Services of the Sterling C. Evans Library at Texas A&M University, where I would like to thank Cathy Jackson and Margaret Hassel. I was also assisted at my university with a College of Liberal Arts faculty development leave in 1995 and English Department support in the way of supplies and clerical support. I would also like to thank the Henry E. Huntington Library for a Mayer Fund Fellowship in the summer of 1994.

At the University of California Press, I would like to thank Stanley Holwitz, associate director and acquisitions editor, and my editors Scott Norton and Betsey Scheiner.

One special person to thank is the late Charles Gordône, author of the play *No Place to Be Somebody* (to whose memory this book is partly dedicated). He occupied the office next to mine during most of the research and writing of this book, and I shared with him many of my discoveries and tried out many passages on him. It was the closest thing to having Whitman himself at my side as I read and wrote. Two others not to be forgotten are the late Clarence Gohdes, who formally introduced me to Whitman almost thirty years ago at Duke University, and the late Gay Wilson Allen, the “dean” of Whitman studies and an early mentor of mine, who was always generous with his knowledge of the poet. I am also grateful to Elaine E. Warner of the Texaco-Metropolitan Opera for making available the text of Father Owen Lee’s stirring Radio Intermission paper on Whitman and opera.

Working on a New York poet while living in the great state of Texas can be expensive, but my sister Mary Loving always had room for me at her West Side apartment when I required a week or so at the New York Public Library. Thanks, too, are certainly in order to my grown children, my son, David, and my daughter, Cameron, who “grew up” on Whitman—and to their spouses, Patricia Sandoval and Donald House, Jr., who I hope will now share that legacy with my grandchildren (represented to date only by Amanda). The first one to thank, always last in such exercises, is my lifelong inspirer and wife, Cathleen Creighton Loving.

CONTENTS



Preface

xI

I

Caresser of Life

I

2

A Thousand Singers, A Thousand Songs

26

3

Some Literary Person

50

4

Heart-Songs in Brooklyn

81

5

Crescent City Sojourn

114

6

Simmering, Simmering, Simmering

141

7

The Beginning of a Great Career

178

8

The New American Bible

209

9

Calamus and the National Calamity

251

10

True Love

296

11

The Good Old Cause

349

12

Dalliances of Eagles

394

13

Good-Bye My Fancy

439

Abbreviations

483

Notes

487

Index of Whitman's Works

547

General Index

555

Illustrations follow pages 208 and 368.

I

CARESSER OF LIFE



These Hospitals, so different from all others—these thousands, and tens
and twenties of thousands of American young men, badly wounded . . .
open a new world somehow to me, giving closer insights,
new things, exploring deeper mines than any yet.

WALT WHITMAN

to Nathaniel Bloom and John F. S. Gray, March 19, 1863

Toward the end of 1862 Walt Whitman traveled to war-torn Virginia in search of his brother, George. The poet stepped off the train at Falmouth Station, near Fredericksburg, and climbed a hill overlooking the Rappahannock River and the previous week's battle site. One of the first scenes that grimly welcomed him, he told his mother on December 29, "was a heap of feet, arms, legs, &c. under a tree in front of a hospital."¹ After finding George at his encampment and spending the next day with him and his regimental comrades ("Capt. Sims, Lieut. Frank Butler, Orderly McReady . . . all used me well"), he began to visit the wounded of the Army of the Potomac. In his notebook he wrote of seeing "the hard accommodations and experiences of campaign life—the shelter tents—the improvised fireplaces in holes in the ground, with small subterranean passages and small mud chimneys, lengthened out by a barrel with both ends knocked out." Near the Lacy House, the major hospital receiving the worst cases (he recalled in 1875 in *Memoranda During the War*), several bodies lay covered only by a "brown woolen blanket. In the door-yard, towards the river, are fresh graves, mostly of officers, their names on pieces of barrel-staves or broken boards, stuck in the dirt." In the subsequent week, such sights wore even harder on the poet:

The results of the late battle are exhibited everywhere about here in thousands of cases, (hundreds die every day,) in the camp, brigade, and division hospitals. These are merely tents, and sometimes very poor ones, the wounded lying on the ground, lucky if their blankets are spread on layers of pine or hemlock twigs, or small leaves. . . . The ground is frozen hard, and there is occasional snow. I go around from one case to another. I do not see that I do much good to these wounded and dying; but I cannot leave them. Once in a while some youngster holds on to me convulsively, and I do what I can for him.

One day Whitman followed a burial party down to the river under a flag of truce. He made friends not only among the Fifty-First and the wounded in the other Union regiments but also with Confederate soldiers who had been taken prisoner. One of the Fifty-First from Brooklyn, where Whitman had known him as a lad, was lying on the cold ground, “all bloody, just after the arm was taken off.” Another was a nineteen-year-old captain from Mississippi, whom he found at the Lacy House shortly after the young officer’s leg was amputated. He was subsequently transferred to Emory Hospital in Washington, where Whitman visited him frequently. “Poor boy,” he told friends back in Brooklyn. “He has suffered a great deal, and still suffers—has eyes as bright as a hawk, but face pale—our affection is quite an affair, quite romantic—sometimes when I lean over to say I am going, he puts his arm round my neck, draws my face down, &c.”²

Although Whitman was slow to engage emotionally in the war effort, these kinds of experiences made it impossible for him ever to retreat from it again. For the poet the Civil War became a marriage ceremony of sorts—between him and his country—and his poignant wartime poems in *Drum-Taps* (1865) a betrothal and a spiritual renewal. Earlier—in “Song of Myself”—Whitman had portrayed himself as a bachelor before the American democracy, “of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding.” This prewar self was representative of the American people, in the best tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson (where the artist descends into the minds of everyone when he thinks for himself), but it also represented the egotist that found “no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.”

With the war the self-styled “caresser of life” became more of a democrat and less of a “kosmos.”

In 1861 the war began, as southern state after state seceded. These actions and their blow to democracy no doubt suggested the idea of a private secession to the Poet of Democracy. The man who would come to be known as the “wound dresser” stayed away from the conflict for almost two years. He had written some poems about loneliness and the need for companions in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and the “Calamus” series, and this mood prevailed amid the hubbub of the war. Shortly after the firing on Fort Sumter, he wrote a few upbeat poems about the war—recruiting poems, it seemed, that may have inspired enlistments when they appeared in the newspapers. In fact, exactly a week after the firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, George Washington Whitman—one of the poet’s five brothers—enlisted as a hundred-days’ soldier in the Thirteenth Regiment of the New York State Militia. In September of that year he reenlisted, this time in the Fifty-First Regiment of New York Volunteers. Shortly afterward, on May 28, 1862, another brother, Andrew Jackson Whitman, became a three-months’ soldier in the Union cause, which seemed to worsen by the battle.³

The first two years of the Civil War are among the most obscure in the record of Whitman’s life, second only to large patches of the famous “foreground” Emerson suspected when he first read *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Whitman fairly disappears from all biographies between May 24, 1860, when he took the new Shore Line Railroad back from Boston after seeing the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* through the press, to December 16, 1862, when the Whitman household at 122 Portland Street, near Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn, got its first indication that brother George had been wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg.⁴ At thirty-six, when Walt Whitman published the first *Leaves of Grass*, he looked his age. Seven years later, at forty-three, he looked fifty-three. Yet the same liquid eyes look out from Matthew Brady’s photograph of 1863 as they do from the frontispiece in the first edition, their stare penetrating, as if to say—as Whitman does in “Song of Myself”—“I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no.” His X-ray vision in poetry had gotten him in a lot of

trouble in the interim, especially after the third edition and the “Children of Adam” poems, which bluntly describe the sexual magnetism between a man and a woman. A phrenological exam made in 1849—when the pseudoscience of gauging character by measuring cranial bumps was popular—had declared this six-foot, two-hundred-pound, still somewhat firmly apportioned male to be “voluptuous.” By 1860 he was fulfilling the prophecy—if perhaps only vicariously and in the poems.

Whitman’s disappearance may have been part of a pattern, begun in 1848 after the initial failure of his Free-Soil newspaper, *The Freeman*, and repeated in 1855, when he spent the summer in the fishing and whaling village of Greenport, at the northeastern end of Long Island, after publishing his first book of poetry.⁵ With the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, instead of getting out of town to watch the literary fireworks, he dropped out of sight—at least as far as his future biographers were concerned. The disappearance may have been as much personal as political. The poems of the 1860 edition—“Children of Adam,” “Calamus,” “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life”—suggest that the late 1850s were “the darkest years of his life.”⁶ And the celebrative “Starting from Paumanok,” written earlier than these poems, seems to force its optimism upon the matter, even in its final revision.

Starting from fish-shape Paumanok where I was born,
 Well-begotten, and rais’d by a perfect mother,
 After roaming many lands, lover of populous pavements,

 . . . I strike up for a New World.

“Take my leaves America,” he said in the poem, and in the context of his controversial literary career after 1855, the phrase seems almost a supplication. Here he resembles his mentor Emerson. At the close of “The Poet” (published in 1844)—the very essay that inspired Whitman as a young journalist when he heard it delivered as a lecture in 1842 in New York City—Emerson exhorted American poets to “doubt not . . . but persist. . . . Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and

stammering, hissed and hooted.”⁷ Emerson himself may have felt “balked and dumb” by 1842—recently stunned by the sudden death of his five-year-old son and soon to pen his essay “Experience,” which tempered the optimism of his earlier work. Certainly, Whitman was “hissed and hooted” for the latest expansion of his poetic vision. In the *Saturday Press*, perhaps the forerunner of *The New Yorker*, *Leaves of Grass* received a thrashing review that advised its author to commit suicide.⁸ By June of 1861, when he returned to newspaper work with the “Brooklyniana” series, his third edition was already lost in the steadily increasing mayhem of the war. Unable to collect revenues from their Southern clients, his publishers had gone bankrupt. Better to secede himself for a time.

“Brooklyniana,” a series of twenty-five pieces in the *Brooklyn Standard* between June 1861 and November 1862, turned back the clock, looking journalistically at the history of Long Island. The island, which stretched out 120 miles from Brooklyn to Montauk, was once the home of the “royal tribe” of old Wyandanch. “This chief,” Whitman had written in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of September 20, 1847, “held a position not unlike our American president.” Long Island had been originally the home of thirteen distinct Indian tribes, where “the Indian inhabitants . . . numbered a million and a half.” Realizing this figure might be an exaggeration, he nevertheless insisted that the “red race” had been very numerous, “as evidenced by many tokens.” Taking up perhaps for the first time a theme that would become the title of his lifelong book, Whitman quoted an “ancient Indian” who “declared to one of the earliest inhabitants of Easthampton, that within his recollection the natives were *as many as the spears of grass*.”⁹

In the series Whitman quickly established the original superiority of Brooklyn to Manhattan. Manhattan, he wrote in No. 1, had been selected by Dutch settlers mainly “as an outpost or place for a trading station, a store and fort—and not for residences.” Because of its sand and rock foundation, the employees of the West Indian Company had settled instead “on the aboriginal island of Paumanock” (or *Pau-manake*, as it sometimes appeared in old Indian deeds).¹⁰ Also spelled “Paumanack,” the American Indian name for Long Island meant “fish-shaped.” In No. 13 of the series, Whitman half in jest suggested

changing the island's name back to Paumanok, as it might "be a kind of poetic justice to the departed tribes of the great nation of Lenni-Lapape, or Delawares, of which stock the aborigines of this region were a part." By the Civil War, this Indian nation had largely disappeared from the island and, indeed, from most of the East as a result of the American Policy of Removal. In Brooklyn and King's County the native residents had been the Canarsees, who—Whitman correctly guessed—had been extinct since 1800. "Now that they have all forever departed," he told a readership then preoccupied with war, "it seems as if their shades deserve at least the poor recompense of the compliment connected in preserving the old name by which they themselves designated and knew this territory."¹¹

Although the poet is today identified as much with Manhattan and Broadway as he is with Brooklyn and Long Island, his loyalty in 1861 was to the east—to the whole of Long Island and "The *State of PAUMANOK!*" Yet as recently as 1857, in "Broadway, the Magnificent!" Whitman had sung of Manhattan with the brilliance he'd put into the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass*. "Broadway!" he exclaimed in *Life Illustrated*, an upscale literary magazine published by his phrenologist friends Fowler and Wells, "that ever-flowing land-river, pouring down through the center of Manhattan Island!" The implicit comparison of New York's most famous avenue with the mighty Mississippi, which he celebrated in writings connected with his visit to New Orleans in 1848, was well won: the river that ran through the heart of America had exchanged its muddy banks for "granite blocks,—its side-banks of marble, iron, plate-glass, brick, and wood." In 1857 Whitman was still upbeat about his chances as a poet and about the nation with poetry in its veins that he celebrated. Manhattan, or "Mannahatta" as he called it, borrowing another Indian name, was the greatest city in the great nation, and Broadway was the city's most brilliant symbol, its delights perfect filler for the poet's long catalogs.

This land-river ran continually between its banks, "ebbing and flowing with American men, women, and with strangers. There they pass, a hundred thousand a day,—sometimes two hundred thousand." In pointing out the historic spots from the Battery upward, Whitman mentioned the "Negro Plot" of 1741 in which "eighty-three persons,

mostly blacks, were either burnt at the stake, hanged, transported, or sold into slavery for a conspiracy to destroy the city." One of the stakes where blacks were burnt, he noted, was at the intersection of Wall Street: "You who come down town to business in the morning! you little think of the horrid spectacle that corner more than once exhibited! the iron pillar—the chains—the fagots of dry wood and straw—the African negro in the middle—the pile touched off—the yells and howls and agonized shrieks—the crowd around stolid and indifferent."¹² Whitman was writing after the bloody incidents in Kansas over the proposed extension of slavery into the new territories, and like his fellow New Yorker Herman Melville (in "Benito Cereno," published in 1856), he was warning of the coming national storm over the old question of slavery in the New World.



At the time when Whitman was writing the "Brooklyniana" series, he had returned to the tranquillity of Greenport. The last stop on the Long Island Railroad, the old whaling village was the home of the poet's sister, Mary Elizabeth, who, more than twenty years before, had at the age of eighteen married Ansel Van Nostrand. The couple's five children are the only source of the Whitman family's descendants today. Like many of the men in his wife's family, Van Nostrand was a shipyard worker; he was also an alcoholic, whose regular binges gave Walt another reason to visit the elder of his two sisters. Since 1855, when his father died at age sixty-five, Whitman had been the family "patriarch," although "troubleshooter" is perhaps a more accurate characterization. He also attended to the problems of his other married sister, a hypochondriac caught up in a bad marriage to a New England landscape artist, as well as those of an older brother with mental deterioration, resulting from a shipboard accident, and a probable case of syphilis, another brother beset by alcoholism and tuberculosis, and a third mentally and physically handicapped.

Whitman made his latest visit to Greenport and vicinity, as he recalled in "Brooklyniana" Nos. 37–39, during the fall of 1861. While the poet fished off the town dock, a party of lively girls, "conveyed by a

clerical looking personage, and one or two younger fellows,” invited him to join them on a pleasure cruise out to Montauk Point. “It was a very pleasant and sensible party,” he told his Brooklyn readers; “the girls were unaffected . . . and the minister laughed and told stories and ate luncheons, just like a common man, which is quite remarkable for a country clergyman.” The poet who had in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* confessed to the “need of comrades” here reveled in the company of young ladies. He enjoyed the group’s merry stories and riddles as it sailed out of Greenport “at a stiff rate,” passing Gardiner’s Island (“the first English settlement ever made in the present limits of the state of New York”) on its way to the Montauk peninsula and the reserved home of what relatively few American Indians still remained on the tip of Long Island.

“Montauk Point!” he exclaimed in No. 38. “How few Americans there are who have not heard of thee—although there are equally few who have seen thee with their bodily eyes, or trodden on thy green-sward.” Once ashore, the party “took a long ramble to and fro,” declaiming what they remembered to be lines from Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. Intoxicated with the wilds of Long Island’s easternmost tip, they “pranced forth” and threw their hats in the air, “aimed stones at the shrieking sea-gulls, mocked the wind, and imitated the cries of various animals in a style that beat nature all out!” After cooking dinner aboard their moored sloop, they found that nightfall prevented their safe return and spent the night onboard, returning to Greenport the next morning. In recalling the trip, Whitman blessed his “lucky star,” he said, “merely to sail—to bend over and look at the ripples as the prow divided the water—to lie on my back and *to breathe and live* in that sweet air and clear sunlight—to hear the musical chatter of the girls, as they pursued their own glee—was happiness enough for one day.”

It may bother some to think that this poet of the people was enjoying himself while his country—as well as his own brothers—was engaged in a bloody civil war. The Montauk outing, in fact, was a solitary voyage of the imagination—a verbatim account for the most part of an essay published under the pen-name of “Paumanok,” in 1849.¹³ Nevertheless, Whitman appears at this point almost untouched by the