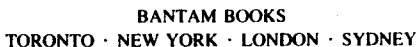


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Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman





LEAVES OF GRASS
A Bantam Book

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Walt Whitman

Before the age of thirty-six there was no sign that Walt Whitman would become even a minor literary figure, let alone the major poetic voice of an emerging America. Born in 1819 on Long Island, he was the second son of a carpenter and contractor. His formal schooling ended at age eleven, when he was apprenticed to a printer in Brooklyn. He became a journeyman printer in 1835 and spent the next two decades as a printer, free-lance writer, and editor in the hectic, growing cities of Brooklyn and New York.

He was named editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* in 1845, but a split in the Democratic party, which backed the *Eagle*, led to his dismissal in 1847. He traveled to New Orleans in 1848 and was briefly editor of the *New Orleans Crescent*, then returned east by way of St. Louis, his only known excursion to what was then the frontier. The young Whitman frequented the opera, dabbled in politics, and immersed himself in the life of the streets. But the poems and stories he published in these years were unimpressive and show no hint of his future greatness.

In 1855, at his own expense, he published the twelve long poems, without titles, that make up the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The frontispiece was a picture of Whitman, dressed as "one of the roughs." The book, with its unprecedented mixture of the mystical and the earthy, was received with puzzlement or silence, except by America's most distinguished writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Whitman lost no time in preparing a second edition, adding "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and nineteen other new poems, in 1856. With the third edition (1860), the book had tripled in size. Whitman would go on adding to it and revising it for the rest of his life.

Whitman experienced the tragedy of the Civil War as a nurse in the military hospitals of Washington, D.C. His war poems appeared in *Drum-Taps* (1865) and were later incorporated into *Leaves of Grass*. He was a clerk in the Department of Interior until the interior secretary discovered he was the author of a "vulgar" book and dismissed him.

Despite such notoriety, Whitman's ~~poetry~~ ~~slowly~~ ~~achieved~~ a wide readership in America and in ~~England~~. He was ~~praised~~ by Swinburne and Tennyson, and visited ~~by~~ Oscar Wilde. He suffered a stroke in 1873 and spent the remainder of his life in Camden, New Jersey. His final edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1892, the year of his ~~death~~.

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Introduction

In January 1892, a few months before his death at the age of seventy-two, a world-famous resident of Camden, New Jersey, prepared this announcement for the press:

Walt Whitman wishes respectfully to notify the public that the book *Leaves of Grass*, which he has been working on at great intervals and partially issued for the past thirty-five or forty years, is now completed, so to call it, and he would like this new 1892 edition to absolutely supersede all previous ones. Faulty as it is, he decides it is by far his special and entire self-chosen poetic utterance.

The 1892 *Leaves of Grass*, for sentimental and promotional reasons dubbed the "Deathbed Edition" by Whitman's literary executors and his Philadelphia publisher, was a bulky volume of 438 pages and almost as many poems. Some were love lyrics, candid and explicit celebrations of sexuality, visionary musings, glimpses of nightmare and ecstasy, poems of loneliness, loss, and mourning, among them Whitman's supreme elegy for Abraham Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Others—"Song of Myself," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," for example—were personal testaments that also epitomized American vision and experience in the nineteenth century.

The "ensemble," as Whitman liked to call the organized totality of his work, was willful and far too inclusive, showing him at his worst as well as his incomparable best; it is best read selectively, at least the first time. But "faulty" as it was, the final *Leaves of Grass* was so much the fulfillment of his entire life—its shaping "desire and conviction"—that he thought of it as a person, his sole comfort and heart's companion.

Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches this touches a man,
(Is it night? are we here together alone?)
It is I you hold and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms . . .

"Here I sit gossiping in the early candle-light of old age," Whitman wrote in a prose epilogue, "I and my book—casting backward glances over our travel'd road. . . . My Book and I—what a period we have presumed to span!" An exact contemporary of Queen Victoria and Herman Melville, he was born in a Long Island farmhouse in 1819, during the first administration of President James Monroe. He came from long-established native stock, landowners, farmers, builders and horse-breeders, who had slid into economic, social, and even genetic decline: of the eight Whitman children who survived infancy, one was the poet who proclaimed his perfect health and perfect blood, three were normal, but four were insane, psychotic, alcoholic, or feeble-minded. At one time or another in his early life he was a printer, schoolteacher, newspaper editor, writer of popular fiction (including a novel about the evils of drink, *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate*), storekeeper, and building contractor. In his early thirties, responding to complex inner and outer imperatives, Whitman awoke to a sense of purpose. Emulating Homer, Shakespeare, and Sir Walter Scott, masters all, he declared, "I will be also a master after my own kind, making the poems of emotions, as they pass or stay, the poems of freedom, and the exposé of personality—singing in high tones democracy and the New World of it through These States." A fragment of early verse suggests the profound personal transformation that was part of the foreground of *Leaves of Grass*:

I cannot be awake, for nothing looks to me as it did before,
Or else I am awake for the first time, and all before has been
a mean sleep.

Together, Whitman and his book saw a young nation, irrepressibly vital and bitterly divided against itself, approach and then survive the terrible bloodletting of the Civil War. The United States, once a dubious political experiment ridiculed by critics abroad, overflowed its continental limits and became an industrialized world power. "I know very well that my 'Leaves'

could not possibly have emerged or been fashion'd or completed, from any other era than the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, nor any other land than democratic America, and from the absolute triumph of the National Union Arms." He had set out to write the poetry of America in the American language. To sing the song of himself, his nation, and his unloosened century, he had rejected conventional literary themes, stock ornamentation, romance, rhyme, formalism—anything that reflected alien times, alien traditions and social orders. Through Whitman and a handful of other midcentury writers, American literature came of age.

When Whitman published *Leaves of Grass* for the first time, in 1855, he was willing to risk everything on a daring proposition, "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." But in the evening of his life he conceded a measure of defeat. "I have not gain'd the acceptance of my time." His most fervent readers as a group were not the American workingmen, artisans, and farmers—the democratic leaven—to whom *Leaves of Grass* had been addressed. Instead they were British writers and intellectuals of the highest degree of cultivation: Oscar Wilde; Algernon Charles Swinburne; Robert Louis Stevenson; Gerard Manley Hopkins; Professor Edward Dowden of Trinity College, Dublin; Alfred Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate. So far as its own country was concerned *Leaves of Grass* in 1892 was still only "a candidate for the future" and would have to subsist "on its own blood." Looking ahead as well as backward over traveled roads, Whitman compared his modern epic to a tree with many growth rings, an elder daughter, a cathedral, a great city like his million-footed Manhattan. None of these comparisons is entirely adequate, but to the extent that the final and "authorized" *Leaves of Grass* is like a city, the six earlier editions are its substrates, each with its own spirit of place and time.

The 1855 *Leaves of Grass* was a peculiar book in both makeup and content. Designed, produced, and published by the author himself, who also set some of the type for it in a Brooklyn printing office, *Leaves of Grass* came into an indifferent world as an album of ninety-five pages. The words "Leaves of Grass" were stamped on the cloth covers in tendriled letters that appeared to be taking root. Inside, the reader's eye was drawn to an engraved portrait of a bearded man in a hat and open-necked shirt, one hand on his hip and the other in his trouser pocket. In keeping with his assertive informality, the author's name ap-

peared neither on the portrait nor on the facing title page. The text began with ten pages of eccentrically punctuated prose set in double columns, a preface that defined the modern poet as a prophet, hero, priest, and supreme arbiter who "judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling round a helpless thing." Another bold statement—

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

—introduced eighty-three pages of poetry, at first glance simply clusters of prose sentences printed like Bible verses.

Do you take it I would astonish?
Does the daylight astonish? or the early redstart twittering
through the woods?
Do I astonish more than they?

The twelve poems of 1855 were untitled except for the insistent head caption for each, "Leaves of Grass." Readers who ignored the copyright page had to wait until they reached page twenty-nine to learn the identity of the bearded loafer of the frontispiece and the anonymous poet:

Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,
Disorderly, fleshy and sensual . . . eating drinking and
breeding,
No sentimentalist . . . no stander above men and women or
apart from them . . . no more modest than immodest.

Leaves of Grass was to grow and change over the next four decades, but it arrived in 1855 not as a "promising" book but as something stylistically and substantively achieved, at once the fulfillment of American literary romanticism, as articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the beginning of American literary modernism. Two of the longer poems, "Song of Myself" and "The Sleepers"—the one relatively sunlit, conscious in argument, and public in voice, the other nocturnal, secret, surreal—are the matrix of all of Whitman's work. Emerson himself recognized right away that *Leaves of Grass* was a decisive event in his nation's literature. It had answered his call for the emergence of

a native genius who possessed "nerve and dagger" and a "tyrannous" command of "our incomparable materials." After some puzzlement over the unknown author's identity and whereabouts he sent Whitman a letter that remains unmatched for the generosity, shrewdness, and force of its understanding.

Concord, Massachusetts, 21 July, 1855.

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 and 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 and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork, or too much lymph in the temperament, were making our western wits fat and mean.

I give you joy of your free and 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, and 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 and encouraging.

I did not know until I last night saw the book advertised in a newspaper that I could trust the name as real and available for a post-office. I wish to see my benefactor, and have felt much like striking my tasks and visiting New York to pay you my respects.

R. W. Emerson.

Without asking Emerson's permission Whitman released this private letter to the New York *Tribune*, arranged to have it printed elsewhere, and distributed it to editors and critics in the form of a broadside. "That was very wrong, very wrong indeed," Emerson complained about these exploitations; friends said they had never seen the Concord sage so angry. But having discerned Whitman's "free & brave thought," "courage," and sense of mission, Emerson should not have been too surprised to find in him also a disregard for conventional proprieties along with the ruthlessness of saints and tyrants. Throughout his career Whitman seized on such opportunities, generated controversy and publicity, arranged favorable accounts of his work, and even reviewed it himself anonymously and pseudonymously. "I have

merely looked myself over and repeated candidly what I saw," he once said. "If you did it for the sake of aggrandizing yourself that would be another thing; but doing it simply for the purpose of getting your own weight and measure is as right done for you by yourself as done for you by another." As for the audience for these exercises: "The public is a thick-skinned beast, and you have to keep whacking away on its hide to let it know you're there." Whitman's incessant clamorings for attention have a certain purity—they were always and ultimately in the service of his sacred book, *Leaves of Grass*, not personal advancement.

Emerson's famous letter became part of the texture of Whitman's plans during 1855 and 1856 as he prepared the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In his notebook he sketched out "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the most significant of the twenty new poems he was to add to his original twelve:

Poem of passage / the scenes on the river / as I cross the / Fulton
ferry / Others will see the flow / of the river, also, / Others will
see on both / sides the city of / New York and the city / of
Brooklyn / a hundred years hence others / will see them . . . The
continual and hurried crowd of / men and women crossing / The
reflection of the sky / in the water—the blinding / dazzle in a
track from / the most declined sun, / The lighters—the sailors / in
their picturesque costumes / the nimbus of light / around the
shadow of my / head in the sunset

Further on, along with trial passages for another major new poem of 1856, "Song of the Broad-Axe," is an entry of a different sort. Enclosed within a large bracket, it occupies a page to itself:

"I greet you at the
beginning of a great
career"

R. W. Emerson

This Ali Baba formula appeared stamped in gold on the spine of Whitman's new book, at the end of which he once again printed the entire letter along with his own letter of response. He hailed Emerson as the prophet of "Individuality—that new moral American continent without which, I see, the physical continent re-

mained incomplete." "Dear Friend and Master," he wrote, "... the work of my life is making poems."

By 1860 Whitman had eliminated all of this prose matter, which he considered superfluous, and had completely restructured his book, so that for the first time it had organic unity as a sort of whole-duty-of-man or generic autobiography—a "New Bible," as he thought of it. Among the 146 new poems in the third *Leaves of Grass* were: "Starting from Paumanok," an announcement of program and themes; the profoundly self-questioning "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life"; "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," which Swinburne called "the most lovely and wonderful thing I have read for years and years . . . such beautiful skill and subtle power"; and "Calamus," a major cycle of lyrics, tender and perturbed, on the theme of comradeship or "manly love." For the first time, too, *Leaves of Grass*, "in a far more complete and favorable form than before," was being "really published," Whitman said, not by him, but by an enthusiastic new firm, Thayer and Eldridge of Boston, who were certain they could sell his book to "the mass public" and do its author some good, "pecuniarily." "I am very, very much satisfied and relieved," Whitman told his brother Jeff, "that the thing, in the permanent form it now is, looks as well and reads as well (to my own notion) as I anticipated—because a good deal, after all, was an experiment—and now I am satisfied." But at the end of 1860 Whitman's affairs took a steep downward turn. Thayer and Eldridge went bankrupt and turned over their stock (including the plates of Whitman's new book) to a rival publisher they considered "illiterate" and a "bitter and relentless enemy."

On his forty-second birthday, in May 1861, a month and a half after the fall of Fort Sumter, Whitman drafted a prose introduction for yet another edition of *Leaves of Grass*. "So far so well, but the most and the best of the Poem I perceive remains unwritten, and is the work of my life yet to be done. . . . The paths to the house are made—but where is the house itself?" The fourth edition that he brought out six years later included, as an "annex," *Drum-Taps*, sequences of poems in response to the Civil War, his service as a volunteer nurse ("wound-dresser") in the Washington military hospitals, and the death of Abraham Lincoln; much as he regretted having written it, "O Captain! My Captain!" written within a month or two of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," because his only poem to make the

anthologies while he lived. But the core of his postwar book—*Leaves of Grass* proper, as distinguished from its annexes—was the 1860 edition so extensively reworked that it seemed almost to be published for the first time. All but 34 of the 456 pages show some sort of revision, ranging from punctuation and single-word corrections to wholesale deletions and additions. A conscious and deliberate craftsman, Whitman reshaped, tightened, and clarified individual poems, rearranged them in order and by group, rejected forty. His revisions, he said, give “a glimpse into the workshop,” and the work went on, for even this new edition was transitional in design and massed effect—unfinished and perhaps, like a city, unfinishable. In 1871 he brought out a fifth *Leaves of Grass*, which included “Passage to India,” and in 1881 a sixth, in which the poems (exclusive of annexes) were arranged in definitive order. The authorized edition of 1892 was the seventh but, had he lived beyond its publication, it might have not been the last.

“From a worldly and business point of view,” Whitman said, looking back over four decades of vicissitude, *Leaves of Grass* had proved to be “worse than a failure.” He had seen it take its place in world literature, but in his own country it remained to a certain extent an outlaw book that had subjected him to “frequent bruises,” ostracism, and public humiliation. “I don’t know if you have ever realized what it means to be a horror in the sight of the people about you,” Whitman said of his standing in literary America. One early reviewer had dismissed *Leaves of Grass* as “a mass of stupid filth.” Another asked, “Who is this arrogant young man who proclaims himself the Poet of the time, and who roots like a pig among a rotten garbage of licentious thoughts?” In 1865 he was fired from his clerkship in the Interior Department because the secretary found *Leaves of Grass* to be outrageous, offensive, and in violation of “the rules of decorum and propriety prescribed by a Christian Civilization.” For Whitman, and for the small band of partisans who had begun to surround him, his well-publicized dismissal crystallized a ten-year pattern of injustices; the prophet mocked and dishonored in his own country became “The Good Gray Poet,” sage, martyr, and redeemer.

During the 1870s he orchestrated an international controversy the main issue of which was his alleged neglect and persecution. And in 1881, just when it seemed that *Leaves of Grass* was once again to have a Boston edition, the district attorney there put

Whitman's publishers under notice. He warned them that in his opinion the book fell "within the provisions of the Public Statutes respecting obscene literature" and recommended that they withdraw and suppress it. The publishers proposed a list of deletions, including extensive passages and three poems in their entirety: "A Woman Waits for Me," "The Dalliance of the Eagles," and "To a Common Prostitute." Whitman refused to make any concessions and soon after managed to find a home for his book in Philadelphia. "As to this last & in some sense most marked buffeting in the fortunes of *Leaves of Grass*," he reflected at the time, "I tickle myself with the thought how it may be said years hence that at any rate *no book on earth ever had such a history*."

JUSTIN KAPLAN

As there are now several editions of L. of G., different texts and dates, I wish to say that I prefer and recommend this present one, complete, for future printing, if there should be any; a copy and fac-simile, indeed, of the text of these [456] pages. The subsequent adjusting interval which is so important to form'd and launch'd work, books especially, has pass'd; and waiting till fully after that, I have given [pages 442—456] my concluding words.

W. W.

Contents

Introduction by Justin Kaplan	xvii
---	------

INSCRIPTIONS

One's-Self I Sing	1
As I Ponder'd in Silence	1
In Cabin'd Ships at Sea	2
To Foreign Lands	3
To a Historian	3
To Thee Old Cause	3
Eidólons	4
For Him I Sing	6
When I Read the Book	6
Beginning My Studies	7
Beginners	7
To The States	7
On Journeys through the States	7
To a Certain Cantatrice	8
Me Imperturbe	8
Savantism	8
The Ship Starting	9
I Hear America Singing	9
What Place Is Besieged?	9
Still Though the One I Sing	10
Shut Not Your Doors	10
Poets to Come	10
To You	10
Thou Reader	11
Starting from Paumanok	11
Song of Myself	22

CHILDREN OF ADAM

To the Garden the World	74
From Pent-up Aching Rivers	74
I Sing the Body Electric	76
A Woman Waits for Me	83
Spontaneous Me	85
One Hour to Madness and Joy	87

Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd	87
Ages and Ages Returning at Intervals	88
We Two, How Long We Were Fool'd	88
O Hymen! O Hymenee!	89
I Am He that Aches with Love	89
Native Moments	89
Once I Pass'd through a Populous City	90
I Heard You Solemn-Sweet Pipes of the Organ	90
Facing West from California's Shores	90
As Adam Early in the Morning	91

CALAMUS

In Paths Untrodden	92
Scented Herbage of My Breast	92
Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand	94
For You O Democracy	95
These I Singing in Spring	96
Not Heaving from My Ribb'd Breast Only	97
Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances	97
The Base of All Metaphysics	98
Recorders Ages Hence	99
When I Heard at the Close of the Day	99
Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me?	100
Roots and Leaves Themselves Alone	100
Not Heat Flames up and Consumes	101
Trickle Drops	101
City of Orgies	102
Behold This Swarthy Face	102
I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing	102
To a Stranger	103
This Moment Yearning and Thoughtful	103
I Hear It Was Charged against Me	104
The Prairie-Grass Dividing	104
When I Peruse the Conquer'd Fame	105
We Two Boys Together Clinging	105
A Promise to California	105
Here the Frailest Leaves of Me	106
No Labor-Saving Machine	106
A Glimpse	106
A Leaf for Hand in Hand	106
Earth, My Likeness	107
I Dream'd in a Dream	107
What Think You I Take My Pen in Hand?	107