

“Walt Whitman”

by *Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price*

Family Origins

Walt Whitman, arguably America’s most influential and innovative poet, was born into a working class family in West Hills, New York, a village near Hempstead, Long Island, on May 31, 1819, just thirty years after George Washington was inaugurated as the first president of the newly formed United States. Walt Whitman was named after his father, a carpenter and farmer who was 34 years old when Whitman was born. Walter Whitman, Sr., had been born just after the end of the American Revolution; always a liberal thinker, he knew and admired Thomas Paine. Trained as a carpenter but struggling to find work, he had taken up farming by the time Walt was born, but when Walt was just about to turn four, Walter Sr. moved the family to the growing city of Brooklyn, across from New York City, or “Mannahatta” as Whitman would come to call it in his celebratory writings about the city that was just emerging as the nation’s major urban center. One of Walt’s favorite stories about his childhood concerned the time General Lafayette visited New York and, selecting the six-year-old Walt from the crowd, lifted him up and carried him. Whitman later came to view this event as a kind of laying on of hands, the French hero of the American Revolution anointing the future poet of democracy in the energetic city of immigrants, where the new nation was being invented day by day.

Walt Whitman is thus of the first generation of Americans who were born in the newly formed United States and grew up assuming the stable existence of the new country. Pride in the emergent nation was rampant, and Walter Sr.—after giving his first son Jesse (1818-1870) his own father’s name, his second son his own name, his daughter Mary (1822-1899) the name of Walt’s maternal great grandmothers, and his daughter Hannah (1823-1908) the name of his own mother—turned to the heroes of the Revolution and the War of 1812 for the names of his other three sons: Andrew Jackson Whitman (1827-1863), George Washington Whitman (1829-1901), and Thomas Jefferson Whitman (1833-1890). Only the youngest son, Edward (1835-1902), who was mentally and physically handicapped, carried a name that tied him to neither the family’s nor the country’s history.

Walter Whitman Sr. was of English stock, and his marriage in 1816 to Louisa Van Velsor, of Dutch and Welsh stock, led to what Walt always considered a fer-

tile tension in the Whitman children between a more smoldering, brooding Puritanical temperament and a sunnier, more outgoing Dutch disposition. Whitman’s father was a stern and sometimes hot-tempered man, maybe an alcoholic, whom Whitman respected but for whom he never felt a great deal of affection. His mother, on the other hand, served throughout his life as his emotional touchstone. There was a special affectional bond between Whitman and his mother, and the long correspondence between them records a kind of partnership in attempting to deal with the family crises that mounted over the years, as Jesse became mentally unstable and violent and eventually had to be institutionalized, as Hannah entered a disastrous marriage with an abusive husband, as Andrew became an alcoholic and married a prostitute before dying of ill health in his 30s, and as Edward required increasingly dedicated care.

Self-Education and First Career

By the age of eleven, Whitman was done with his formal education (by this time he had far more schooling than either of his parents had received), and he began his life as a laborer, working first as an office boy for some prominent Brooklyn lawyers, who gave him a subscription to a circulating library, where his self-education began. Always an autodidact, Whitman absorbed an eclectic but wide-ranging education through his visits to museums, his nonstop reading, and his penchant for engaging everyone he met in conversation and debate. While most other major writers of his time enjoyed highly structured, classical educations at private institutions, Whitman forged his own rough and informal curriculum of literature, theater, history, geography, music, and archeology out of the developing public resources of America’s fastest growing city.

In 1831, Whitman became an apprentice on the Long Island *Patriot*, a liberal, working-class newspaper, where he learned the printing trade and was first exposed to the excitement of putting words into print, observing how thought and event could be quickly transformed into language and immediately communicated to thousands of readers. At the age of twelve, young Walt was already contributing to the newspaper and experiencing the exhilaration of getting his own words published. Whitman’s first signed article, in the upscale New York

Mirror in 1834, expressed his amazement at how there were still people alive who could remember “the present great metropolitan city as a little *dorp* or village; all fresh and green as it was, from its beginning,” and he wrote of a slave, “Negro Harry,” who had died in 1758 at age 120 and who could remember New York “when there were but three houses in it.” Even late in his life, he could still recall the excitement of seeing this first article in print: “How it made my heart double-beat to see *my piece* on the pretty white paper, in nice type.” For his entire life, he would maintain this fascination with the materiality of printed objects, with the way his voice and identity could be embodied in type and paper.

Living away from home—the rest of his family moved back to the West Hills area in 1833, leaving fourteen-year-old Walt alone in the city—and learning how to set type under the *Patriot’s* foreman printer William Hartshorne, Whitman was gaining skills and experiencing an independence that would mark his whole career: he would always retain a typesetter’s concern for how his words looked on a page, what typeface they were dressed in, what effects various spatial arrangements had, and he would always retain his stubborn independence, never marrying and living alone for most of his life. These early years on his own in Brooklyn and New York remained a formative influence on his writing, for it was during this time that he developed the habit of close observation of the ever-shifting panorama of the city, and a great deal of his journalism, poetry, and prose came to focus on catalogs of urban life and the history of New York City, Brooklyn, and Long Island.

Walt’s brother Thomas Jefferson, known to everyone in the family as “Jeff,” was born during the summer of 1833, soon after his family had resettled on a farm and only weeks after Walt had joined the crowds in Brooklyn that warmly welcomed the newly re-elected president, Andrew Jackson. Brother Jeff, fourteen years younger than Walt, would become the sibling he felt closest to, their bond formed when they traveled together to New Orleans in 1848, when Jeff was about the same age as Walt was when Jeff was born. But while Jeff was a young child, Whitman spent little time with him. Walt remained separated from his family and furthered his education by absorbing the power of language from a variety of sources: various circulating libraries (where he read Sir Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, and other romance novelists), theaters (where he fell in love with Shakespeare’s plays and saw Junius Booth, John Wilkes Booth’s father, play the title role in *Richard III*, always Whitman’s favorite play), and lectures (where he heard, among others, Frances Wright, the Scottish radical emancipationist and women’s rights

advocate). By the time he was sixteen, Walt was a journeyman printer and compositor in New York City. His future career seemed set in the newspaper and printing trades, but then two of New York’s worst fires wiped out the major printing and business centers of the city, and, in the midst of a dismal financial climate, Whitman retreated to rural Long Island, joining his family at Hempstead in 1836. As he turned 17, the five-year veteran of the printing trade was already on the verge of a career change.

Schoolteaching Years

His unlikely next career was that of a teacher. Although his own formal education was, by today’s standards, minimal, he had developed as a newspaper apprentice the skills of reading and writing, more than enough for the kind of teaching he would find himself doing over the next few years. He knew he did not want to become a farmer, and he rebelled at his father’s attempts to get him to work on the new family farm. Teaching was therefore an escape but was also clearly a job he was forced to take in bad economic times, and some of the unhappiest times of his life were these five years when he taught school in at least ten different Long Island towns, rooming in the homes of his students, teaching three-month terms to large and heterogeneous classes (some with over eighty students, ranging in age from five to fifteen, for up to nine hours a day), getting very little pay, and having to put up with some very unenlightened people. After the excitement of Brooklyn and New York, these often isolated Long Island towns depressed Whitman, and he recorded his disdain for country people in a series of letters (not discovered until the 1980s) that he wrote to a friend named Abraham Leech: “Never before have I entertained so low an idea of the beauty and perfection of man’s nature, never have I seen humanity in so degraded a shape, as here,” he wrote from Woodbury in 1840: “Ignorance, vulgarity, rudeness, conceit, and dulness are the reigning gods of this deuced sink of despair.”

The little evidence we have of his teaching (mostly from short recollections by a few former students) suggests that Whitman employed what were then progressive techniques—encouraging students to think aloud rather than simply recite, refusing to punish by paddling, involving his students in educational games, and joining his students in baseball and card games. He did not hesitate to use his own poems—which he was by this time writing with some frequency, though they were rhymed, conventional verses that indicated nothing of the innovative poetry to come—as texts in his classroom. While he would continue to write frequently about edu-

cational issues and would always retain a keen interest in how knowledge is acquired, he was clearly not suited to be a country teacher. One of the poems in his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, eventually called "There Was a Child Went Forth," can be read as a statement of Whitman's educational philosophy, celebrating unrestricted extracurricular learning, an openness to experience and ideas that would allow for endless absorption of variety and difference: this was the kind of education Whitman had given himself and the kind he valued. He would always be suspicious of classrooms, and his great poem "Song of Myself" is generated by a child's wondering question, "What is the grass?," a question that Whitman spends the rest of the poem ruminating about as he discovers the complex in the seemingly simple, the cosmos in himself—an attitude that is possible, he says, only when we put "creeds and schools in abeyance." He kept himself alive intellectually by taking an active part in debating societies and in political campaigns: inspired by the Scottish reformist Frances Wright, who came to the United States to support Martin Van Buren in the presidential election of 1836, Whitman became an industrious worker for the Democratic party, campaigning hard for Martin Van Buren's successful candidacy.

By 1841, Whitman's second career was at an end. He had interrupted his teaching in 1838 to try his luck at starting his own newspaper, *The Long Islander*, devoted to covering the towns around Huntington. He bought a press and type and hired his younger brother George as an assistant, but, despite his energetic efforts to edit, publish, write for, and deliver the new paper, it folded within a year, and he reluctantly returned to the classroom. Newspaper work made him happy, but teaching did not, and two years later, he abruptly quit his job as an itinerant schoolteacher.

Whitman the Fiction Writer

How ambitious was Whitman as a writer of short fiction? The evidence suggests that he was definitely more than a casual dabbler and that he threw himself energetically into composing stories. Still, he did not give himself over to fiction with the kind of life-changing commitment he would later give to experimental poetry. He was adding to his accomplishments, moving beyond being a respectable journalist and developing literary talents and aspirations. About twenty different newspapers and magazines printed Whitman's fiction and early poetry. His best years for fiction were between 1840 and 1845 when he placed his stories in a range of magazines, including the *American Review* (later called the *American Whig Review*) and the *Democratic Review*,

one of the nation's most prestigious literary magazines. As a writer of fiction, he lacked the impulse toward innovation and the commitment to self-training that later moved him toward experimental verse, even though we can trace in his fiction some of the themes that would later flourish in *Leaves of Grass*.

His early stories are captivating in large part because they address obliquely (not to say crudely) important professional and psychological matters. His first published story, "Death in the School-Room," grew out of his teaching experience and interjected direct editorializing commentary: the narrator hopes that the "many ingenious methods of child-torture will [soon] be gaz'd upon as a scorned memento of an ignorant, cruel, and exploded doctrine." This tale had a surprise ending: the teacher flogs a student he thinks is sleeping only to make the macabre discovery that he has been beating a corpse. Another story, "The Shadow and the Light of a Young Man's Soul," offered a barely fictionalized account of Whitman's own circumstances and attitudes: the hero, Archibald Dean, left New York because of the great fire to take charge of a small district school, a move that made him feel "as though the last float-plank which buoyed him up on hope and happiness, was sinking, and he with it." Other stories concern themselves with friendships between older and younger men (especially younger men who are weak or in need of defense since they are misunderstood and at odds with figures of authority).

Whitman's steady stream of stories in the *Democratic Review* in 1842—he published five between January and September—must have made Park Benjamin, editor of the *New World*, conclude that Whitman was the perfect candidate to write a novel that would speak to the booming temperance movement. Whitman had earlier worked for Benjamin as a printer, and the two had quarreled, leading Whitman to write "Bamboozle and Benjamin," an article attacking this irascible editor whose practice of rapidly printing advance copies of novels, typically by English writers, threatened both the development of native writers and the viability of U.S. publishing houses. But now both men were willing to overlook past differences in order to seize a good financial opportunity.

In an extra number in November 1842, Benjamin's *New World* published Whitman's *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate*. The novel centers on a country boy who, after falling prey to drink in the big city, eventually causes the death of three women. The plot, which ends in a conventional moralistic way, was typical of temperance literature in allowing sensationalism into literature under a moral guise. Whitman's treatment of romance and

passion here, however, is unpersuasive and seems to confirm a remark he had made two years earlier that he knew nothing about women either by “experience or observation.” The novel stands nonetheless as one of the earliest explorations in American literature of the theme of miscegenation, and its treatment of the enslaved (white) body, captive to drink, has resonance, as does the novel’s fascination with “fatal pleasure,” Evans’s name for the strong attraction most men feel for sinful experience, be it drink or sex.

Interestingly, *Franklin Evans* sold more copies (approximately 20,000) than anything else Whitman published in his lifetime. The work succeeded despite being a patched-together concoction of new writing and previously composed stories. Whitman claimed he completed *Franklin Evans* in three days and that he composed parts of the novel in the reading room of Tammany Hall, inspired by gin cocktails (another time he claimed he was buoyed by a bottle of port.) He eventually described *Franklin Evans* as “damned rot—rot of the worst sort.”

Itinerant Journalist

During the time he was writing temperance fiction, Whitman remained a generally successful journalist. He cultivated a fashionable appearance: William Cauldwell, an apprentice who knew him as lead editor at the New York *Aurora*, said that Whitman “usually wore a frock coat and high hat, carried a small cane, and the lapel of his coat was almost invariably ornamented with a boutonniere.” In 1842 and 1843 he moved easily in and out of positions (as was then common among journalists) on an array of newspapers, including, in addition to the *Aurora*, the New York *Evening Tattler*, the New York *Statesman*, and the New York *Sunday Times*. And he wrote on topics ranging from criticizing how the police rounded up prostitutes to denouncing Bishop John Hughes for his effort to use public funds to support parochial schools.

Whitman left New York in 1845, perhaps because of financial uncertainty resulting from his fluctuating income. He returned to Brooklyn and to steadier work in a somewhat less competitive journalistic environment. Often regarded as a New York City writer, his residence and professional career in the city actually ended, then, a full decade before the first appearance of *Leaves of Grass*. However, even after his move to Brooklyn, he remained connected to New York: he shuttled back and forth via the Fulton ferry, and he drew imaginatively on the city’s rich and varied splendor for his subject matter.

Opera Lover

Opera was one of the many attractions that encouraged Whitman’s frequent returns to New York. In 1846 Whitman began attending performances (often with his brother Jeff), a practice that was disrupted only by the onset of the Civil War (and even during the war, he managed to attend operas whenever he got back to New York). Whitman loved the thought of the human body as its own musical instrument, and his fascination with voice would later manifest itself in his desire to be an orator and in his frequent inclusion of oratorical elements in his poetry. For Whitman, listening to opera had the intensity of a “love-grip.”

Mature Journalist

By the mid-1840s, Whitman had a keen awareness of the cultural resources of New York City and probably had more inside knowledge of New York journalism than anyone else in Brooklyn. The *Long Island Star* recognized his value as a journalist and, once he resettled in Brooklyn, quickly arranged to have him compose a series of editorials, two or three a week, from September 1845 to March 1846. With the death of William Marsh, the editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle*, Whitman became chief editor of that paper (he served from March 5, 1846 to January 18, 1848). He dedicated himself to journalism in these years and published little of his own poetry and fiction. However, he introduced literary reviewing to the *Eagle*, and he commented, if often superficially, on writers such as Carlyle and Emerson, who in the next decade would have a significant impact on *Leaves of Grass*. The editor’s role gave Whitman a platform from which to comment on various issues from street lighting to politics, from banking to poetry. But Whitman claimed that what he most valued was not the ability to promote his opinions, but rather something more intimate, the “curious kind of sympathy . . . that arises in the mind of a newspaper conductor with the public he serves. He gets to *love* them.”

For Whitman, to serve the public was to frame issues in accordance with working class interests—and for Whitman this usually meant *white* working class interests. He sometimes dreaded slave labor as a “black tide” that could overwhelm white workingmen. He was adamant that slavery should not be allowed into the new western territories because he feared whites would not migrate to an area where their own labor was devalued unfairly by the institution of black slavery. Periodically, Whitman expressed outrage at practices that furthered slavery itself: for example, he was incensed at laws that made possible the importation of slaves by way of Bra-

zil. Like Lincoln, he consistently opposed slavery and its further extension, even while he knew (again like Lincoln) that the more extreme abolitionists threatened the Union itself. In a famous incident, Whitman lost his position as editor of the *Eagle* because the publisher, Isaac Van Anden, as an “Old Hunker,” sided with conservative pro-slavery Democrats and could no longer abide Whitman’s support of free soil and the Wilmot Proviso (a legislative proposal designed to stop the expansion of slavery into the western territories).

New Orleans Sojourn

Fortunately, on February 9, 1846, Whitman met, between acts of a performance at the Broadway Theatre in New York, J. E. McClure, who intended to launch a New Orleans paper, the *Crescent*, with an associate, A. H. Hayes. In a stunningly short time—reportedly in fifteen minutes—McClure struck a deal with Whitman and provided him with an advance to cover his travel expenses to New Orleans. Whitman’s younger brother Jeff, then only fifteen years old, decided to travel with Walt and work as an office boy on the paper. The journey—by train, steamboat, and stagecoach—widened Walt’s sense of the country’s scope and diversity, as he left the New York City and Long Island area for the first time. Once in New Orleans, Walt did not have the famous New Orleans romance with a beautiful Creole woman, a relationship first imagined by the biographer Henry Bryan Binns and further elaborated by others who were charmed by the city’s exoticism and who were eager to identify heterosexual desires in the poet. The published versions of his New Orleans poem called “Once I Pass’d Through a Populous City” seem to recount a romance with a woman, though the original manuscript reveals that he initially wrote with a male lover in mind.

Whatever the nature of his personal attachments in New Orleans, he certainly encountered a city full of color and excitement. He wandered the French quarter and the old French market, attracted by “the Indian and negro hucksters with their wares” and the “great Creole mulatto woman” who sold him the best coffee he ever tasted. He enjoyed the “splendid and roomy bars” (with “exquisite wines, and the perfect and mild French brandy”) that were packed with soldiers who had recently returned from the war with Mexico, and his first encounters with young men who had seen battle, many of them recovering from war wounds, occurred in New Orleans, a precursor of his Civil War experiences. He was entranced by the intoxicating mix of languages—French and Spanish and English—in that cosmopolitan city and began to see the possibilities of a distinctive American culture emerging from the melding of races

and backgrounds (his own fondness for using French terms may well have derived from his New Orleans stay). But the exotic nature of the Southern city was not without its horrors: slaves were auctioned within an easy walk of where the Whitman brothers were lodging at the Tremont House, around the corner from Lafayette Square. Whitman never forgot the experience of seeing humans on the selling block, and he kept a poster of a slave auction hanging in his room for many years as a reminder that such dehumanizing events occurred regularly in the United States. The slave auction was an experience that he would later incorporate in his poem “I Sing the Body Electric.”

Walt felt wonderfully healthy in New Orleans, concluding that it agreed with him better than New York, but Jeff was often sick with dysentery, and his illness and homesickness contributed to their growing desire to return home. The final decision, though, was taken out of the hands of the brothers, as the *Crescent* owners exhibited what Whitman called a “singular sort of coldness” toward their new editor. They probably feared that this northern editor would embarrass them because of his unorthodox ideas, especially about slavery. Whitman’s sojourn in New Orleans lasted only three months.

Budding Poet

His trip South produced a few lively sketches of New Orleans life and at least one poem, “Sailing the Mississippi at Midnight,” in which the steamboat journey becomes a symbolic journey of life:

Vast and starless, the pall of heaven
Laps on the trailing pall below;
And forward, forward, in solemn darkness,
As if to the sea of the lost we go.

Throughout much of the 1840s Whitman wrote conventional poems like this one, often echoing Bryant, and, at times, Shelley and Keats. Bryant—and the graveyard school of English poetry—probably had the most important impact on his sensibility, as can be seen in his pre-*Leaves of Grass* poems “Our Future Lot,” “Ambition,” “The Winding-Up,” “The Love that is Hereafter,” and “Death of the Nature-Lover.” The poetry of these years is artificial in diction and didactic in purpose; Whitman rarely seems inspired or innovative. Instead, tired language usually renders the poems inert. By the end of the decade, however, Whitman had undertaken serious self-education in the art of poetry, conducted in a typically unorthodox way—he clipped essays and reviews about leading British and American writers, and as he studied them he began to be a more aggressive reader and a more resistant respondent. His marginalia on these

articles demonstrate that he was learning to write not in the manner of his predecessors but against them.

The mystery about Whitman in the late 1840s is the speed of his transformation from an unoriginal and conventional poet into one who abruptly abandoned conventional rhyme and meter and, in jottings begun at this time, exploited the odd loveliness of homely imagery, finding beauty in the commonplace but expressing it in an uncommon way. What is known as Whitman's earliest notebook (called "albot Wilson" in the *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*) may have been written as early as 1847, though much of the writing probably derives from the early 1850s. This extraordinary document contains early articulations of some of Whitman's most compelling ideas. Famous passages on "Dilation," on "True noble expanding American character," and on the "soul enfolding orbs" are memorable prose statements that express the newly expansive sense of self that Whitman was discovering, and we find him here creating the conditions—setting the tone and articulating the ideas—that would allow for the writing of *Leaves of Grass*.

Racial Politics and the Origins of Leaves of Grass

A pivotal and empowering change came over Whitman at this time of poetic transformation. His politics—and especially his racial attitudes—underwent a profound alteration. As we have noted, Whitman the journalist spoke to the interests of the day and from a particular class perspective when he advanced the interests of white workingmen while seeming, at times, unconcerned about the plight of blacks. Perhaps the New Orleans experience had prompted a change in attitude, a change that was intensified by an increasing number of friendships with radical thinkers and writers who led Whitman to rethink his attitudes toward the issue of race. Whatever the cause, in Whitman's future-oriented poetry blacks become central to his new literary project and central to his understanding of democracy. Notebook passages assert that the poet has the "divine grammar of all tongues, and says indifferently and alike How are you friend? to the President in the midst of his cabinet, and Good day my brother, to Sambo among the hoes of the sugar field."

It appears that Whitman's increasing frustration with the Democratic party's compromising approaches to the slavery crisis led him to continue his political efforts through the more subtle and indirect means of experimental poetry, a poetry that he hoped would be read by masses of average Americans and would transform their way of thinking. In any event, his first notebook

lines in the manner of *Leaves of Grass* focus directly on the fundamental issue dividing the United States. His notebook breaks into free verse for the first time in lines that seek to bind opposed categories, to link black and white, to join master and slave:

I am the poet of the body
And I am the poet of the soul
And I am
I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the
masters
And I will stand between the masters and the
slaves,
Entering into both so that both will understand
me alike.

The audacity of that final line remains striking. While most people were lining up on one side or another, Whitman placed himself in that space—sometimes violent, sometimes erotic, always volatile—*between* master and slave. His extreme political despair led him to replace what he now named the "scum" of corrupt American politics in the 1850s with his own persona—a shaman, a culture-healer, an all-encompassing "I."

The American "I"

That "I" became the main character of *Leaves of Grass*, the explosive book of twelve untitled poems that he wrote in the early years of the 1850s, and for which he set some of the type, designed the cover, and carefully oversaw all the details. When Whitman wrote "I, now thirty-six years old, in perfect health, begin," he announced a new identity for himself, and his novitiate came at an age quite advanced for a poet. Keats by that age had been dead for ten years; Byron had died at exactly that age; Wordsworth and Coleridge produced *Lyrical Ballads* while both were in their twenties; Bryant had written "Thanatopsis," his best-known poem, at age sixteen; and most other great Romantic poets Whitman admired had done their most memorable work early in their adult lives. Whitman, in contrast, by the time he had reached his mid-thirties, seemed destined, if he were to achieve fame in any field, to do so as a journalist or perhaps as a writer of fiction, but no one could have guessed that this middle-aged writer of sensationalistic fiction and sentimental verse would suddenly begin to produce work that would eventually lead many to view him as America's greatest and most revolutionary poet.

The mystery that has intrigued biographers and critics over the years has been about what prompted the transformation: did Whitman undergo some sort of spiritual illumination that opened the floodgates of a radical new kind of poetry, or was this poetry the result of an original and carefully calculated strategy to blend

journalism, oratory, popular music, and other cultural forces into an innovative American voice like the one Ralph Waldo Emerson had called for in his essay “The Poet”? “Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the Northern trade, the Southern planting, the Western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung,” wrote Emerson; “Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.” Whitman began writing poetry that seemed, wildly yet systematically, to record every single thing that Emerson called for, and he began his preface to the 1855 *Leaves* by paraphrasing Emerson: “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” The romantic view of Whitman is that he was suddenly inspired to impulsively write the poems that transformed American poetry; the more pragmatic view holds that Whitman devoted himself in the five years before the first publication of *Leaves* to a disciplined series of experiments that led to the gradual and intricate structuring of his singular style. Was he truly the intoxicated poet Emerson imagined or was he the architect of a poetic persona that cleverly mimicked Emerson’s description?

There is evidence to support both theories. We know very little about the details of Whitman’s life in the early 1850s; it is as if he retreated from the public world to receive inspiration, and there are relatively few remaining manuscripts of the poems in the first edition of *Leaves*, leading many to believe that they emerged in a fury of inspiration. On the other hand, the manuscripts that do remain indicate that Whitman meticulously worked and reworked passages of his poems, heavily revising entire drafts of the poems, and that he issued detailed instructions to the Rome brothers, the printers who were setting his book in type, carefully overseeing every aspect of the production of his book.

Whitman seems, then, to have been both inspired poet and skilled craftsman, at once under the spell of his newly discovered and intoxicating free verse style while also remaining very much in control of it, adjusting and altering and rearranging. For the rest of his life, he would add, delete, fuse, separate, and rearrange poems as he issued six very distinct editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Emerson once described Whitman’s poetry as “a remarkable mixture of the Bhagvat Ghita and the *New York Herald*,” and that odd joining of the scriptural and the vernacular, the transcendent and the mundane, effectively captures the quality of Whitman’s work, work that most readers experience as simultaneously magical and commonplace, sublime and prosaic. It was work pro-

duced by a poet who was both sage and huckster, who touched the gods with ink-smudged fingers, and who was concerned as much with the sales and reviews of his book as with the state of the human soul.

The First Edition of Leaves of Grass

Whitman paid out of his own pocket for the production of the first edition of his book and had only 795 copies printed, which he bound at various times as his finances permitted. He always recalled the book as appearing, fittingly, on the Fourth of July, as a kind of literary Independence Day. His joy at getting the book published was quickly diminished by the death of his father within a week of the appearance of *Leaves*. Walter Sr. had been ill for several years, and though he and Walt had never been particularly close, they had only recently traveled together to West Hills, Long Island, to the old Whitman homestead where Walt was born. Now his father’s death along with his older brother Jesse’s absence as a merchant marine (and later Jesse’s growing violence and mental instability) meant that Walt would become the father-substitute for the family, the person his mother and siblings would turn to for help and guidance. He had already had some experience enacting that role even while Walter Sr. was alive; perhaps because of Walter Sr.’s drinking habits and growing general depression, young Walt had taken on a number of adult responsibilities—buying boots for his brothers, for instance, and holding the title to the family house as early as 1847. Now, however, he became the only person his mother and siblings could turn to.

But even given these growing family burdens, he managed to concentrate on his new book, and, just as he oversaw all the details of its composition and printing, so now did he supervise its distribution and try to control its reception. Even though Whitman claimed that the first edition sold out, the book in fact had very poor sales. He sent copies to a number of well-known writers (including John Greenleaf Whittier, who, legend has it, threw his copy in the fire), but only one responded, and that, fittingly, was Emerson, who recognized in Whitman’s work the very spirit and tone and style he had called for. “I greet you at the beginning of a great career,” Emerson wrote in his private letter to Whitman, noting that *Leaves of Grass* “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.” Whitman’s was poetry that would literally get the country in shape, Emerson believed, *give* it shape, and help work off its excess of aristocratic fat.

Whitman's book was an extraordinary accomplishment: after trying for over a decade to address in journalism and fiction the social issues (such as education, temperance, slavery, prostitution, immigration, democratic representation) that challenged the new nation, Whitman now turned to an unprecedented form, a kind of experimental verse cast in unrhymed long lines with no identifiable meter, the voice an uncanny combination of oratory, journalism, and the Bible—haranguing, mundane, and prophetic—all in the service of identifying a new American democratic attitude, an absorptive and accepting voice that would catalog the diversity of the country and manage to hold it all in a vast, single, unified identity. "Do I contradict myself?" Whitman asked confidently toward the end of the long poem he would come to call "Song of Myself": "Very well then . . . I contradict myself; / I am large . . . I contain multitudes." This new voice spoke confidently of union at a time of incredible division and tension in the culture, and it spoke with the assurance of one for whom everything, no matter how degraded, could be celebrated as part of itself: "What is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest is Me." His work echoed with the lingo of the American urban working class and reached deep into the various corners of the roiling nineteenth-century culture, reverberating with the nation's stormy politics, its motley music, its new technologies, its fascination with science, and its evolving pride in an American language that was forming as a tongue distinct from British English.

Though it was no secret who the author of *Leaves of Grass* was, the fact that Whitman did not put his name on the title page was an unconventional and suggestive act (his name would in fact not appear on a title page of *Leaves* until the 1876 "Author's Edition" of the book, and then only when Whitman signed his name on the title page as each book was sold). The absence of a name indicated, perhaps, that the author of this book believed he spoke not for himself so much as for America. But opposite the title page was a portrait of Whitman, an engraving made from a daguerreotype that the photographer Gabriel Harrison had made during the summer of 1854. It has become the most famous frontispiece in literary history, showing Walt in workman's clothes, shirt open, hat on and cocked to the side, standing insouciantly and fixing the reader with a challenging stare. It is a full-body pose that indicates Whitman's recalibration of the role of poet as the democratic spokesperson who no longer speaks only from the intellect and with the formality of tradition and education: the new poet pictured in Whitman's book is a poet who speaks from and with the whole body and who writes *outside*, in Nature, not in the library. It was what Whitman called "al fresco" poetry, poetry written outside the walls, the bounds, of convention and tradition.