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Edited by Kenneth M. Price
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LEAVES OF GRASS (1855)

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Leaves

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Grass.

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[Charles A. Dana]. "New Publications: *Leaves of Grass.*" New York *Daily Tribune*, 23 July 1855, p. 3.

From the unique effigies of the anonymous author of this volume which graces the frontispiece, we may infer that he belongs to the exemplary class of society sometimes irreverently styled "loafers." He is therein represented in a garb, half sailor's, half workman's, with no superfluous appendage of coat or waistcoat, a "wide-awake" perched jauntily on his head, one hand in his pocket and the other on his hip, with a certain air of mild defiance, and an expression of pensive insolence in his face which seems to betoken a consciousness of his mission as the "coming man." This view of the author is confirmed in the preface. He vouchsafes, before introducing us to his poetry, to enlighten our benighted minds as to the true function of the American poet. Evidently the original, which is embodied in the most extraordinary prose since the "Sayings" of the modern Orpheus, was found in the "interior consciousness" of the writer. Of the materials afforded by this country for the operations of poetic art we have a lucid account.

> The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings, necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes . . . Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves. Here the performance disdaining the trivial unapproached in the tremendous audacity of its crowds and groupings and the push of its perspective spreads with crampless and flowing breadth and showers its prolific and splendid extravagance. One sees it must indeed own the riches of the Summer and Winter, and need never be bankrupt while corn grows from the ground or the orchards drop apples or the bays contain fish or men beget children upon women.

With veins full of such poetical stuff, the United States, as we are kindly informed, "of all nations most needs poets, and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest." Here is a full-length figure of the true poet:

> Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man. Not in him but off from him things are grotesque or eccentric or fail of their sanity. Nothing out of its place is good and nothing in its place is bad. He bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions, neither more nor less. He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land. . . . he supplies what wants supplying and checks what wants checking. If peace is the routine out of him speaks the spirit of peace, large, rich, thrifty, building vast and populous cities, encouraging agriculture and the arts and commerce—lighting the study of man, the soul, immortality—federal, state

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> or municipal government, marriage, health, freetrade, intertravel by land and sea. . . . nothing too close, nothing too far off . . . the stars not too far off. In war he is the most deadly force of the war. Who recruits him recruits horse and foot. . . . he fetches parks of artillery the best that engineer ever knew. If the time becomes slothful and heavy he knows how to arouse it. . . . he can make every word he speaks draw blood. Whatever stagnates in the flat of custom or obedience or legislation, he never stagnates. Obedience does not master him, he masters it. High up out of reach he stands turning a concentrated light. . . . he turns the pivot with his finger. . . . he baffles the swiftest runners as he stands and easily overtakes and envelops them. The time straying toward infidelity and confections and persiflage he withholds by his steady faith. . . . he spreads out his dishes. . . . he offers the sweet firm-fibred meat that grows men and women. His brain is the ultimate brain. He is no arguer . . . he is judgment. He judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing. As he sees the farthest he has the most faith. His thoughts are the hymns of the praise of things. In the talk on the soul and eternity and God off of his equal plane he is silent. He sees eternity less like a play with a prologue and denouement . . . he sees eternity in men and women . . . he does not see men and women as dreams or dots.

Of the nature of poetry the writer discourses in a somewhat too oracular strain, especially as he has been anticipated in his "utterances" by Emerson and other modern "prophets of the soul":

> The poetic quality is not marshaled in rhyme or uniformity or abstract addresses to things, nor in melancholy complaints or good precepts, but is the life of these and much else and is in the soul. The profit of rhyme is that it drops seeds of a sweeter and more luxuriant rhyme, and of uniformity that it conveys itself into its own roots in the ground out of sight. The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form. The fluency and ornaments of the finest poems or music or orations or recitations are not independent but dependent. All beauty comes from beautiful blood and a beautiful brain. If the greatnesses are in conjunction in a man or woman it is enough. . . . the fact will prevail through the universe. . . . but the gaggery and gilt of a million years will not prevail. Who troubles himself about his ornaments or fluency is lost. This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, reexamine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words

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but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

Such is the poetic theory of our nameless bard. He furnishes a severe standard for the estimate of his own productions. His *Leaves of Grass* are doubtless intended as an illustration of the natural poet. They are certainly original in their external form, have been shaped on no pre-existent model out of the author's own brain. Indeed, his independence often becomes coarse and defiant. His language is too frequently reckless and indecent though this appears to arise from a naive unconsciousness rather than from an impure mind. His words might have passed between Adam and Eve in Paradise, before the want of fig-leaves brought no shame; but they are quite out of place amid the decorum of modern society, and will justly prevent his volume from free circulation in scrupulous circles. With these glaring faults, the *Leaves of Grass* are not destitute of peculiar poetic merits, which will awaken an interest in the lovers of literary curiosities. They are full of bold, stirring thoughts—with occasional passages of effective description, betraying a genuine intimacy with Nature and a keen appreciation of beauty—often presenting a rare felicity of diction, but so disfigured with eccentric fancies as to prevent a consecutive perusal without offense, though no impartial reader can fail to be impressed with the vigor and quaint beauty of isolated portions. A few specimens will suffice to give an idea of this odd genius.

THE LOVER OF NATURE.

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night;
I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.

Press close barebosomed night! Press close magnetic nourishing night!
Night of south winds! Night of the large few stars!
Still nodding night! Mad naked summer night!
Smile O voluptuous coolbreathed earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of departed sunset! Earth of the mountains misty-topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!
Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!
Far-swooping elbowed earth! Rich apple-blossomed earth!
Smile, for your lover comes!

Prodigal! you have given me love!. . . . therefore I to you give love!
O unspeakable passionate love!
You sea! I resign myself to you also. . . . I guess what you mean,
I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,
I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me;
We must have a turn together. . . . I undress. . . . hurry me out of sight of the land,
Cushion me soft. . . . rock me in billowy drowse,
Dash me with amorous wet. . . . I can repay you.

Sea of stretched ground-swells!
Sea breathing broad and convulsive breaths!
Sea of the brine of life! Sea of unshoveled and always-ready graves!
Howler and scooper of storms! Capricious and dainty sea!

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I am integral with you. . . . I too am
of one phase and of all phases.

AFTER A SEA-FIGHT.

Stretched and still lay the midnight,
Two great hulls motionless on the
breast of the darkness,
Our vessel riddled and slowly
sinking . . . preparations to pass to
the one we had conquered,
The captain on the quarter-deck
coldly giving his orders through a
countenance white as a sheet,
Near by the corpse of the child that
served in the cabin,
The dead face of an old salt with
long white hair and carefully curled
whiskers,
The flames spite of all that could be
done flickering aloft and below,
The husky voices of the two or three
officers yet fit for duty,
Formless stacks of bodies and bodies
by themselves . . . dabs of flesh
upon the mass and spars,
The cut of cordage and dangle of
rigging. . . . the slight shock of the
soothe of waves,
Black and impassive guns, and litter
of powder parcels, and the strong
scent,
Delicate sniffs of the seabreeze. . . .
smells of sedgy grass and fields by
the shore. . . . death messages given
in charge to survivors,
The hiss of the surgeon's knife and
the gnawing teeth of his saw,
The wheeze, the cluck, the swash of
falling blood. . . . the short wild
scream, the long dull tapering
groan,
These so. . . . these irretrievable!

NATURAL IDEALISM.

All doctrines, all politics and
civilization exurge from you,
All scripture and monuments and
anything inscribed anywhere are
tallied in you,
The gist of histories and statistics as
far back as the records reach is in
you this hour—and myths and tales
the same;
If you were not breathing and
walking here where would they all
be?
The most renowned poems would be
ashes . . . orations and plays would
be vacuums.
All architecture is what you do to it
when you look upon it;
Did you think it was in the white or
gray stone? or the lines of the
arches and cornices?

All music is what awakens from you
when you are reminded by the
instruments,
It is not the violins and the
cornets. . . . it is not the oboe nor
the beating drums—nor the notes
of the baritone singer singing his
sweet romanza. . . . nor those of
the men's chorus, nor those of the
women's chorus,
It is nearer and further than they.

THE LAST OF EARTH.

When the dull nights are over, and
the dull days also,
When the soreness of lying so much
in bed is over,
When the physician, after long
putting off, gives the silent and
terrible look for an answer,
When the children come hurried and
weeping, and the brothers and
sisters have been sent for,
When medicines stand unused on the
shelf, and the camphor-smell has
pervaded the rooms,
When the faithful hand of the living
does not desert the hand of the
dying,
When the twitching lips press lightly

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on the forehead of the dying,
When the breath ceases and the pulse of the heart ceases,
Then the corpse-limbs stretch on the bed, and the living look upon them.
They are palpable as the living are palpable.

The living look upon the corpse with their eyesight.
But without eyesight lingers a different living and looks curiously on the corpse.

THE HUMAN FACE DIVINE.

Sauntering the pavement or riding the country by-road here then are faces,
Faces of friendship, precision, caution, suavity, ideality,
The spiritual prescient face, the always welcome common benevolent face,
The face of the singing of music, the grand faces of natural lawyers and judges broad at the backtop,
The faces of hunters and fishers, bulged at the brows. . . . the shaved blanched faces of orthodox citizens,
The pure extravagant yearning questioning artist's face,
The welcome ugly face of some beautiful soul. . . . the handsome detested or despised face,
The sacred faces of infants . . . the illuminated face of the mother of many children,
The face of an amour . . . the face of veneration,
The face as of a dream . . . the face of an immobile rock,
The face withdrawn of its good and bad . . . a castrated face,
A wild hawk . . . his wings clipped by the clipper.

Sauntering the pavement or crossing the ceaseless ferry, here then are faces;
I see them and complain not and am content with all.
Do you suppose I could be content with all if I thought them their own finale?
This now is too lamentable a face for a man:
Some abject louse asking leave to be . . . cringing for it,
Some milk-nosed maggot blessing what lets it wrig to its hole.

This face is a dog's snout sniffing for garbage;
Snakes nest in that mouth . . . I hear the sibilant threat.
This face is a haze more chill than the Arctic Sea,
Its sleepy and wobbling icebergs crunch as they go.
This is a face of bitter herbs . . . this an emetic . . . they need no label,
And more of the drug-shelf . . . laudanum, caoutchouc, or hog's lard.

This face is an epilepsy advertising and doing business. . . . its wordless tongue gives out the unearthly cry,
Its veins down the neck distend. . . . its eyes roll till they show nothing but their whites,
Its teeth grit . . . the palms of the hands are cut by the turned-in nails,
The man falls struggling and foaming to the ground while he speculates well.
This face is bitten by vermin and worms,
And this is some murderer's knife with a half-pulled scabbard.

This face owes to the sexton his dismalest fee,
As unceasing death-bell tolls there.

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The volume contains many more "Leaves of Grass" of similar quality, as well as others which cannot be especially commended either for fragrance or form. Whatever severity of criticism they may challenge for their rude ingenuousness, and their frequent divergence into the domain of the fantastic, the taste of not over dainty fastidiousness will discern much of the essential spirit of poetry beneath an uncouth and grotesque embodiment.

Life Illustrated, 28 July 1855 [page number unknown].

A curious title; but the book itself is a hundred times more curious. It is like no other book that ever was written, and therefore, the language usually employed in notices of new publications is unavailable in describing it.

It is a thin volume of 95 pages, shaped like a small atlas. On the first page is a portrait of the unknown author. He stands in a careless attitude, without coat or vest, with a rough felt hat on his head, one hand thurst [*sic.*] lazily into his pocket and the other resting on his hip. He is the picture of a *perfect loafer;* yet a thoughtful loafer, an amiable loafer, an able loafer. Then follows a long preface, which most steadygoing, respectable people would pronounce perfect nonsense, but which free-souled persons, here and there, will read and *chuckle over* with real delight, as the expression of their own best feelings. This remarkable preface is something in the Emersonian manner—that is, it is a succession of independent sentences, many of which are of striking truth and beauty. The body of the volume is filled with 'Leaves of Grass,' which are lines of rhythmical prose, or a series of *utterances* (we know not what else to call them), unconnected, curious, and original. The book, perhaps, might be called, *American Life, from a Poetical Loafer's Point of View.*

The discerning reader will find in this singular book much that will please him, and we advise all who are fond of new and peculiar things to procure it. We may add that the book was printed by the author's own hands, and that he is philosophically indifferent as to its sale. It pleased him to write *so*, and the public may take it or let it alone, just as they prefer.

[Walt Whitman]. "Walt Whitman and His Poems." *United States Review* 5 (September 1855), 205–12.

An American bard at last! One of the roughs, large, proud, affectionate, eating, drinking, and breeding, his costume manly and free, his face sunburnt and bearded, his posture strong and erect, his voice bringing hope and prophecy to the generous races of young and old. We shall cease shamming and be what we really are. We shall start an athletic and defiant literature. We realize now how it is, and what was most lacking. The interior American republic shall also be declared free and independent.

For all our intellectual people, followed by their books, poems, novels, essays, editorials, lectures, tuitions, and criticism, dress by London and Paris modes, receive what is received there, obey the au-

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thorities, settle disputes by the old tests, keep out of rain and sun, retreat to the shelter of houses and schools, trim their hair, shave, touch not the earth barefoot, and enter not the sea except in a complete bathing-dress. One sees unmistakably genteel persons, travelled, college-learned, used to be served by servants, conversing without heat or vulgarity, supported on chairs, or walking through handsomely-carpeted parlors, or along shelves bearing well-bound volumes, and walls adorned with curtained and collared portraits, and china things, and nick-nacks. But where in American literature is the first show of America? Where are the gristle and beards, and broad breasts, and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the souls of the people love? Where is the tremendous outdoors of these States? Where is the majesty of the federal mother, seated with more than antique grace, calm, just, indulgent to her brood of children, calling them around her regarding the little and the large and the younger and the older with perfect impartiality? Where is the vehement growth of our cities? Where is the spirit of the strong rich life of the American mechanic, farmer, sailor, hunter, and miner? Where is the huge composite of all other nations, cast in a fresher and brawnier matrix, passing adolescence, and needed this day, live and arrogant, to lead the marches of the world?

Self-reliant, with haughty eyes, assuming to himself all the attributes of his country, steps Walt Whitman into literature, talking like a man unaware that there was ever hitherto such a production as a book, or such a being as a writer. Every move of him has the free play of the muscle of one who never knew what it was to feel that he stood in the presence of a superior. Every word that falls from his mouth shows silent disdain and defiance of the old theories and forms. Every phrase announces new laws; not once do his lips unclose except in conformity with them. With light and rapid touch he first indicates in prose the principles of the foundation of a race of poets so deeply to spring from the American people, and become ingrained through them, that their Presidents shall not be the common referees so much as that great race of poets shall. He proceeds himself to exemplify this new school, and set models for their expression and range of subjects. He makes audacious and native use of his own body and soul. He must re-create poetry with the elements always at hand. He must imbue it with himself as he is, disorderly, fleshy, and sensual, a lover of things, yet a lover of men and women above the whole of the other objects of the universe. His work is to be achieved by unusual methods. Neither classic or romantic is he, nor a materialist any more than a spiritualist. Not a whisper comes out of him of the old stock talk and rhyme of poetry—not the first recognition of gods or goddesses, or Greece or Rome. No breath of Europe, or her monarchies, or priestly conventions, or her notions of gentlemen and ladies founded on the idea of caste, seems ever to have fanned his face or been inhaled into his lungs. But in their stead pour vast and fluid the fresh mentality of this mighty age, and the realities of this mighty continent, and the sciences and inventions and discoveries of the present world. Not geology, nor mathematics, nor chemistry, nor navigation, nor astronomy, nor anatomy, nor physiology, nor engineering, is more true to itself than Walt Whitman is true to them. They and the other sciences underlie his whole superstructure. In the beauty of the work of the poet, he affirms, are the tuft and final applause of science.

Affairs then are this man's poems. He will still inject nature through civilization.

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The movement of his verses is the sweeping movement of great currents of living people, with a general government, and state and municipal governments, courts, commerce, manufactures, arsenals, steamships, railroads, telegraphs, cities with paved streets, and aqueducts, and police and gas—myriads of travellers arriving and departing—newspapers, music, elections and all the features and processes of the nineteenth century in the wholesomest race and the only stable form of politics at present upon the earth. Along his words spread the broad impartialities of the United States. No innovations must be permitted on the stern severities of our liberty and equality. Undecked also is this poet with sentimentalism, or jingle, or nice conceits or flowery similes. He appears in his poems surrounded by women and children, and by young men, and by common objects and qualities. He gives to each just what belongs to it, neither more or less. The person nearest him, that person he ushers hand in hand with himself. Duly take places in his flowing procession, and step to the sounds of the newer and larger music, the essences of American things, and past and present events—the enormous diversity of temperature and agriculture and mines—the tribes of red aborigines—the weather-beaten vessels entering new ports, or making landings on rocky coasts—the first settlements north and south—the rapid stature and impatience of outside control—the sturdy defiance of '76, and the war and peace, and the leadership of Washington, and the formation of the Constitution—the Union always calm and impregnable—the perpetual coming of immigrants—the wharf-hemmed cities and superior marine—the unsurveyed interior—the log-house, and clearings, and wild animals, and hunters, and trappers—the fisheries, and whaling, and gold-digging—the endless gestation of new states—the convening of Congress every December, the members coming up from all climates, and from the uttermost parts—the noble character of the free American workman and workwoman—the fierceness of the people when well-roused—the ardor of their friendships—the large amativeness—the Yankee swap—the New York fireman, and the target excursion—the southern plantation life—the character of the north-east, and of the north-west and south-west—and the character of America and the American people everywhere. For these the old usages of poets afford Walt Whitman no means sufficiently fit and free, and he rejects the old usages. The style of the bard that is waited for is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic. Its quality is to go through these to much more. Let the age and wars (he says) of other nations be chanted, and their eras and characters be illustrated, and that finish the verse. Not so (he continues) the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative and has vista. Here comes one among the well-beloved stonecutters, and announces himself, and plans with decision and science, and sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms.

The style of these poems, therefore, is simply their own style, new-born and red. Nature may have given the hint to the author of the *Leaves of Grass*, but there exists no book or fragment of a book, which can have given the hint to them. All beauty, he says, comes from beautiful blood and a beautiful brain. His rhythm and uniformity he will conceal in the roots of his verses, not to be seen of themselves, but to break forth loosely as lilies on a bush, and take shapes compact as the shapes of melons, or chestnuts, or pears.

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