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978-0-521-45387-5 - Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Kenneth M. Price

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The American Critical Archives is a series of reference books that provide representative selections of contemporary reviews of the main works of major American authors. Specifically, each volume contains both full reviews and excerpts from reviews that appeared in newspapers and weekly and monthly periodicals, generally within a few months of the publication of the work concerned. There is an introductory historical overview by the volume editor, as well as checklists of additional reviews located but not quoted. This volume, a significant contribution to the reception history of *Leaves of Grass*, *Specimen Days*, and other works, reproduces the full range of the contemporary reviews of Whitman's books. Brash and iconoclastic, revered and reviled at various times, Whitman—because of his bold literary experiments and frank treatment of sexuality—was accorded an astonishing array of commentary, ranging from sympathy with his “hearty wholesomeness” to hostility toward poems that were a “mass of stupid filth.” Reviews by Rufus Griswold, Fanny Fern, John Burroughs, William Dean Howells, Henry James, Hamlin Garland, Oscar Wilde, and (writing anonymously) Whitman himself, as well as a host of lesser-known writers, clarify much about both the poet and nineteenth-century American culture and its tastes and preoccupations, its myopia and acuity. These reviewers, the first to frame the issues for critical debate about Whitman, shaped his long-term reputation.

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# Walt Whitman

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## The Contemporary Reviews

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Kenneth M. Price  
*College of William & Mary*



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# Series Editor's Preface

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The American Critical Archives series documents a part of a writer's career that is usually difficult to examine, that is, the immediate response to each work as it was made public on the part of reviewers in contemporary newspapers and journals. Although it would not be feasible to reprint every review, each volume in the series reprints a selection of reviews designed to provide the reader with a proportionate sense of the critical response, whether it was positive, negative, or mixed. Checklists of other known reviews are also included to complete the documentary record and allow access for those who wish to do further reading and research.

The editor of each volume has provided an introduction that surveys the career of the author in the context of the contemporary critical response. Ideally, the introduction will inform the reader in brief of what is to be learned by a reading of the full volume. The reader then can go as deeply as necessary in terms of the kind of information desired—be it about a single work, a period in the author's life, or the author's entire career. The intent is to provide quick and easy access to the material for students, scholars, librarians, and general readers.

When completed, the American Critical Archives should constitute a comprehensive history of critical practice in America, and in some cases Great Britain, as the writers' careers were in progress. The volumes open a window on the patterns and forces that have shaped the history of American writing and the reputations of the writers. These are primary documents in the literary and cultural life of the nation.

M. THOMAS INGE



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# Introduction

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The contemporary reviews of Walt Whitman indicate that he was always in a swirl of controversy. He made for good press by violating poetic norms, treating taboo subjects, and acting in various audacious ways, including (early in his career) meshing together the roles of “rough” and artist. The contemporary fascination with Whitman only increased when publishers pirated *Leaves of Grass*, British and American newspapers exchanged barbs over his reception, the secretary of the interior fired him from his government clerkship, and the district attorney of Boston suppressed *Leaves* as “obscene” literature. Journalistic pieces about Whitman—both human-interest stories and, even more, literary reviews—were important because Whitman’s long-term critical reputation began to take shape in this context of controversy.

To many commentators, the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* was downright quirky. Issued without an author’s name on the title page and without titles for individual poems, everything about the book—from its unorthodox punctuation to its startling assertions—challenged readers. Some of the initial reviews were harsh, but, for an experimental book, *Leaves* garnered a surprising amount of measured criticism and some outright praise. On 23 July 1855, in the New York *Daily Tribune*, for example, the first reviewer, Charles A. Dana, commented insightfully on the “anonymous bard”: He noted the “pensive insolence” of the frontispiece, quoted extensively from the preface, and (though concerned about “reckless and indecent” language) credited the poems with being “certainly original in their external form.” A few days later, an anonymous reviewer for *Life Illustrated* followed Dana’s example by describing the frontispiece and stressing the importance of Whitman’s preface.<sup>1</sup>

In August 1855 no reviews of *Leaves* appeared, a silence that Whitman responded to by writing three of his own unsigned reviews, two appearing in September and another in October (discussed later). These acts of self-promotion contributed to—and to some extent helped provoke—the sudden outpouring of praise and condemnation showered on Whitman. Both Charles Eliot Norton and Edward Everett Hale wrote discerning analyses. Norton thought *Leaves* conveyed a mixture of Yankee transcendentalism and New York rowdiness, and Hale, writing in the *North American Review*, admired

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the poetry's "freshness, simplicity, and reality."<sup>2</sup> The Washington *Daily National Intelligencer*, in contrast, put a negative construction on Whitman's link to transcendentalism, asserting that if Emerson admired the work "its hieroglyphs would be as unintelligible to our ken as was the inscription around the sacred ibex to the erudite Mr. [George Robins] Gliddon." Rufus Griswold, both supercilious and sanctimonious, thought Whitman produced a "mass of stupid filth" and wondered if the poet were not "possessed of the soul of a sentimental donkey that had died of disappointed love." Griswold's attempts at humor quickly gave way to moral condemnations when he had recourse to Latin in order to chastise Whitman as a same-sex lover: "*Peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum*" (that horrible sin not to be named among Christians). Fanny Fern retorted, in the earliest review signed by a woman, that *Leaves of Grass* was "unspeakably delicious" and an "unmingled delight." She scorned those false purists who charged that the book was coarse and sensual: "Let him who can do so, shroud the eyes of the nursing babe lest it should see its mother's breast."<sup>3</sup>

The first British reviewer, in the London *Weekly Dispatch*, took a view similar to Fanny Fern's and applauded the "hearty wholesomeness" of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. Disoriented by the lack of "every condition under which poetry is generally understood to exist," the *Dispatch* nonetheless found in Whitman's lines a melody "peculiar and appropriate to themselves alone." Less than a week later, however, the *Saturday Review* condemned Whitman as obscene and concluded that his book ought to be thrown "instantly into the fire." Other harsh British reviews were quick to appear. On 22 March 1856 the *Examiner* described Whitman as a poet "perpetually haunted by the delusion that he has a catalogue to make." Dubbing the poet a "wild Tupper of the West," its reviewer was the first of a series of commentators (British more often than not) who linked *Leaves of Grass* with *Proverbial Philosophy* by Martin Farquhar Tupper.<sup>4</sup> The *Leader*, for example, thought neither poet effective, because their "external form . . . is startling, and by no means seductive, to English ears, accustomed to the sumptuous music of ordinary metres." Worse yet, the "central principle" of *Leaves of Grass* is "staggering," for it "seems to resolve itself into an all-attracting egotism—an eternal presence of the individual soul of Walt Whitman in all things, yet in such wise that this one soul shall be presented as a type of all human souls whatsoever."<sup>5</sup> The London *Critic* judged Whitman to be as "unacquainted with art, as a hog is with mathematics." Ridicule gave way to panic when its reviewer wished to have bodily harm inflicted on Whitman: "The man who wrote page 79 of the *Leaves of Grass* deserves nothing so richly as the public executioner's whip" (an indignant reaction to Whitman's account of "lovesflesh swelling and deliciously aching, / Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous").<sup>6</sup>

Whitman strove both to protect himself from zealous reviewers and to advertise his book when he interjected his own anonymous reviews into the

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ongoing discussion of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>7</sup> He battled to get his book a hearing and to frame key interpretive questions. His anonymous self-reviewing is as fascinating for the energy and inventiveness it displays as for what it reveals about his ability to conceive of himself as other,<sup>8</sup> to regard his poetic self as apart from himself. This habit of mind had many effects, including, for example, the renaming of himself as “Walt” as opposed to Walter and his development of a shifting, multifaceted persona.

In addition, Whitman’s self-reviews show his desire to manage public perception of his relation to “literature” itself. “An English and an American Poet” contrasted *Leaves of Grass* with the work of Tennyson, who Whitman believed displayed symptoms of overrefinement and “ennui” characteristic of English culture as a whole. In “Walt Whitman and His Poems,” the poet describes himself as “talking like a man unaware that there was ever hitherto such a production as a book or such a being as a writer.” He also published “Walt Whitman: A Brooklyn Boy” in the *Brooklyn Daily Times*. This review opens with the claim that “to give judgment on real poems, one needs an account of the poet himself.” He then describes himself so as to stress his bond with working-class Americans.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the original *Leaves of Grass*, which was widely noticed, the second edition, of 1856, received only three reviews, two mixed and one sharply negative.<sup>10</sup> Audaciously, in the second edition, Whitman had printed without permission Emerson’s famous letter of greeting and extracted one sentence (“I greet you at the beginning of a great career”) to serve as a gold-lettered puff on the spine of the book. The *Christian Examiner* judged these actions to be the “grossest violation of literary comity and courtesy that ever passed under our notice.” More generally, its reviewer found Whitman’s “self-applause” to be nearly as repugnant as his “pantheism and libidinousness.” The *Brooklyn Daily Times* focused on the “new, enlarged and stereotyped edition,” which puts forth Whitman’s “two-fold assertion of individuality . . . of himself personally, and of himself nationally.” The work is “altogether *sui generis*, unless we may call it Emersonian.”<sup>11</sup>

Whitman’s literary manners, specifically his self-reviewing, also came in for sharp attack. On 17 December 1856, the *New York Daily Times* (in assessing simultaneously the first two editions) commented on turning to the “forepart” of one volume to find “proof slips of certain review articles written about the *Leaves of Grass*.”<sup>12</sup> Two of these reviews, when compared with the 1855 preface, provided “unmistakable internal evidence that Mr. Walt Whitman . . . was not content with writing a book, but was also determined to review it.”<sup>13</sup> His poetry scorns hypocrisy, yet Whitman himself “perpetrates a lie and a sham at the very outset of his career.”<sup>14</sup> The *Times* also rankled at Whitman’s use of Emerson’s letter, terming it nothing better than “literary fraud.” Despite its occasional harshness, this review deserves close attention, for the critic struggles, fascinatingly, to reconcile his own divided responses to

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Whitman. On the one hand, he asserts that Whitman puts forth the “emblems of Phallic worship” and produces a “muck of abomination”; on the other, he notes that Whitman “has expressed certain things better than any other man who has gone before him.” For all his misgivings, the reviewer appreciates the “singular electric attraction” and the “wondrous, unaccountable fascination” of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>15</sup>

The debate over the quality of the third edition, of 1860, began, in effect, with a preliminary scuffle in the preceding year, when the Cincinnati *Daily Commercial* reviewed the magazine publication of “A Child’s Reminiscence” (later entitled “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”). The *Commercial* describes the poem as “a shade less heavy and vulgar than the ‘Leaves of Grass,’ whose unmitigated badness seemed to cap the climax of poetic nuisances. But the present performance has all the emptiness, without half the grossness, of the author’s former efforts.” Moreover, Whitman is excoriated as an “unclean cub” whose lines are “stupid and meaningless twaddle.” In direct response, the poet wrote “All About a Mockingbird,” his own anonymous evaluation of “Cradle” (published in the friendly pages of the New York *Saturday Press*). He described the treatment he received in the *Commercial* as “tip-top cutting-and-slashing criticism, which we have conned with unfeigned pleasure.” He then takes the occasion to announce “the true ‘Leaves of Grass’ [the third edition], the fuller grown work of which the former two issues were the inchoates.”<sup>16</sup>

In general, the third edition was sharply criticized by English reviewers;<sup>17</sup> nonetheless, they found the book fascinating as a tangible object. The *Saturday Review*, for example, commented that “the type is magnificent, the paper is as thick as cardboard, and the covers, ornamented with an intaglio of the earth moving through space and displaying only the American hemisphere. . . . It is a book evidently intended to lie on the tables of the wealthy.” The “splendid” features of the book seemed, however, curious adornments for “one of the most indecent writers who ever raked . . . filth into sentences.” The *Westminster Review* also noted the expense the American publisher went to in its “outward setting-forth.” The *Spectator*, in turn, commented on this “Protean, ubiquitous, and multitudinous person” and wondered:

Where are the phallic emblems, and the figures of Priapus and the Satyrs that should have adorned the covers and the pages of this new gospel of lewdness and obscenity? Its frontispiece should have been, not the head and shoulders of the author, but a full-length portrait drawn as he loves to depict himself in his ‘poems’—naked as an Anabaptist of Munster, or making love like Diogenes coram populo [in front of the people].<sup>18</sup>

American reviewers tended to be far more positive in their responses. Although the New York *Times* objected to Whitman’s “indecentcies” and “self-conceit,” the Boston *Banner of Light* countered that Whitman, better than

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any other writer, has “seized hold of the *spirit* of things.”<sup>19</sup> Moncure Conway concluded of the 1860 edition that “Whitman has set the pulses of America to music.” His “profanity is reverently meant, and he speaks what is unspeakable with the simple unreserve of a child.” An equally effusive long review appeared in the *Saturday Press*, which judged Whitman to be a “great Philosopher.” Whitman’s “expression seems always the suitable and natural result of the thought. It is indeed tame and prosy in the conveyance of any commonplace idea or feeling, but it rises and melts into sweet and thrilling music whenever impelled by the beautiful impulse of a grand thought or emotion.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1865, several reviewers preferred Whitman’s new volume, *Drum-Taps*, over *Leaves of Grass* because of the “propriety”<sup>21</sup> of his subject matter and the appearance of “greater . . . beauty of form.”<sup>22</sup> *Watson’s Weekly Art Journal* enthused that “for the first time, the full strength of our American life receives expression—receives assertion.” The *Radical* also admired the work, explaining that the “true poet discovers new and unsuspected laws of art, and makes his own rules,” and Whitman is “unquestionably a true poet.” The most insightful review, by John Burroughs, offers a lengthy account of Whitman’s life, the publication and reception history of *Leaves of Grass*, and an analysis of *Drum-Taps* itself. A discriminating admirer of Whitman’s work, Burroughs responds especially powerfully to “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”:

By that curious indirect method which is always the method of nature, the poet makes no reference to the mere facts of Lincoln’s death—neither describes it, or laments it, or dwells upon its unprovoked atrocity, or its political aspects, but quite beyond the possibilities of the art of the ordinary versifier, he seizes upon three beautiful facts of nature which he weaves into a wreath for the dead President’s tomb.<sup>23</sup>

Other reviewers remained convinced, however, that Whitman’s work was inartistic. The *New York Times* sputtered disapproval of Whitman’s “poverty of thought, paraded forth with a hubbub of stray words.” The two most famous reviews of *Drum-Taps*—by William Dean Howells and Henry James—were also negative. Howells judged the artistic method of *Leaves* to be “mistaken.” Considering his popular success, Whitman’s theory must be wrong: He has enjoyed the “fructifying extremes of blame and praise,” yet he remains little known to the popular mind. James regarded *Drum-Taps* as the effort of an “essentially prosaic mind to lift itself, by a prolonged muscular strain, into poetry.”<sup>24</sup>

Robert Buchanan reviewed *Drum-Taps* and *Leaves of Grass* (1867) after Whitman was fired from his job in the Interior Department. Buchanan’s review, little more than a puff of Whitman’s image, is important because it is one of only two known reviews of the 1867 *Leaves of Grass*. (The other

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review, probably by John Burroughs, appeared in the Boston *Commonwealth*.)<sup>25</sup> Even more surprising, the 1876 *Leaves of Grass* apparently was not reviewed at all and *Democratic Vistas* (1871) only in England.<sup>26</sup> At first glance, the lack of reviews seems curious because many general treatments of Whitman were appearing in these years: In 1876 alone, for example, four books and at least seventy-one periodical items discussed the poet. Two main factors contributed to the dearth of reviews: First, reviewers tended to ignore volumes entitled *Leaves of Grass* because they seemed to repeat previous work. (Thus, when the 1876 *Leaves of Grass* was published with its companion volume, *Two Rivulets*, it was *Two Rivulets* that received critical notice.) Whitman's unusual publication history also hurt his chances of gaining publicity through conventional reviewing channels. Along with *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman published eleven separately titled volumes, and in six cases he served as his own publisher.<sup>27</sup> For much of his career, Whitman lacked the aid powerful publishers routinely offered in helping arrange for reviews of books.

Whitman had compensations, however. His unorthodox entrance into the English literary world—through William Michael Rossetti's publication of selections from *Leaves of Grass*—led to increased attention from abroad. The London *Sunday Times* of 29 March 1868 reviewed Rossetti's selections. Noting that “unreflective readers will see nothing but a harsh and over-daring Tupper,” the reviewer argued that a genuine affinity existed between Whitman and Rabelais and Montaigne: “The greatest works of all times, from the earliest literature of Greek and Hebrew, to the latest of France and England, are offensive to English prudery.” Rossetti, responding to prevailing mores, printed some poems in their entirety and others not at all. Hence he is “no Bowdler”; his efforts go “to herald the entire work rather than to render it unnecessary.” *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, on the other hand, called Rossetti a disciple and wondered whether his selections were always judicious. Its reviewer admired what had been made available from *Leaves of Grass*. He found it paradoxical, however, that Whitman's other writing could be “so disfigured by violation of morality and decency, as to be rather too much for the English reader; and, stranger still, to hear Mr. Rossetti praying for a complete edition.” The most favorable review, “Walt Whitman's Poems,” appeared in the London *Sun*. For its reviewer, reading the Rossetti selections “yielded. . . exquisite pleasure.” The reviewer was particularly impressed by Whitman's “thoughts, emotions, aspirations, expressed as in a new language, and, once so expressed, never afterwards to be altogether forgotten.”<sup>28</sup>

Much discussion centered on whether Whitman deserved the name “poet.” The *Saturday Review*, critiquing the Rossetti volume, remarked, “To call a man a poet merely because he holds forth in rhapsodical style about one man being as good as another, everything being all right, every one having a right ‘to do as he dam pleases’ . . . and other dogmas of the same sort, is to confuse the functions of the poet and the stump orator.”<sup>29</sup> *Chambers's Journal of*



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*Popular Literature, Science, and Art* acknowledged being predisposed against Whitman because of the “extravagant praise” he had been given but conceded that he was “really noteworthy,” the “first characteristic poetical writer the United States have produced.” He “does not write verse at all” but has “invented a certain rolling changeful metre of his own.”<sup>30</sup>

The English gave three reviews to *Two Rivulets*, while the American press failed to notice the book. The earliest commentator, Edmund Gosse, tried to achieve a moderate position, viewing Whitman as a “pure man of excellent intentions, to whom certain primitive truths with regard to human life have presented themselves with great vividness, and who has chosen to present them to us in semi-rhythmic, rhetorical language, which rises occasionally, in fervent moments to a kind of inarticulate poetry, and falls at others into something very inchoate and formless.” J. H. McCarthy, in the *Examiner*, noted that in this volume Whitman had turned away from love and passion: the “present volume is distinctly a political, a historical, or, perhaps more correctly still, a prophetic book, and it deals with and treats of the mighty future of America.” The reviewer found in Whitman “virtues and strength sufficient for claiming laureateship of the great American nation.” Paradoxically, Whitman was better known and appreciated in the “land of the stranger than at home.” W. Hale White, writing belatedly in the *Secular Review* in 1880, observed that *Two Rivulets* received little recognition in England. He regretted that lack of attention because “this book contains, perhaps, the best defense of Democracy which has been offered of late years . . . and some of the truest poetry.”<sup>31</sup>

The agreement Whitman reached to have the 1881–2 *Leaves of Grass* published by James R. Osgood marked a breakthrough for the poet, promising a new level of acceptability and literary prestige. The importance of an established publisher is suggested by the many reviews the 1881–2 *Leaves of Grass* received even before the suppression controversy. The *New York Sun*, in “Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the Future,” finds in *Leaves* an “egotism that reaches the verge of sublimity,” and proceeds to compare, side by side, passages from Whitman and the Bible. (Unusually for the time, this review held that the “three or four poems which have rhyme are of the crudest and the stanzas are fetters.”) The *Liberty* of Boston respectfully reviewed the volume, saying that Whitman’s work was now tastefully “got up” without losing its “original native simplicity, freshness, and vigor.” The *Critic*, in addition to applauding Whitman’s promotion of “universal love,” noted the anomaly that Whitman had been the champion of democracy and the working man, despite being “caviare to the multitude.” That is, “his admirers have been almost exclusively of a class the farthest possibly removed from that which labors for daily bread by manual work.”<sup>32</sup>

The *Dial* of Chicago was representative of those that found little merit in Whitman: His “lack of a sense of poetic fitness, his failure to understand the

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business of a poet, is certainly astounding. . . . In view of his savage contempt for anything musical in poetry, it will be a fine stroke of the irony of fate if he shall be destined to be remembered only by the few pieces which are marked by the 'piano tune' quality that he derides—the true and tender lyric of 'My Captain' and the fine poem on 'Ethiopia Saluting the Colors.'" Somewhat surprisingly, this reviewer also considered "Lilacs" a magnificent threnody. The *Literary World* objected to "passages which sound like a lecture on the obstetrics of lust . . . and the apotheosis of the phallus."<sup>33</sup> The *Detroit Free Press* granted that Whitman was "genuine and thoroughly believes in himself," yet its reviewer felt that "Children of Adam" was an "outrage upon the decencies of literature," and concluded that "when such a work . . . has free circulation and transmission through the mails, an argument . . . is furnished for the professional perverters of youth whose vile trash is really less indecorous in form." Similarly, the New York *Examiner* commented that "we are not sure that the book is not amenable to the laws against sending obscene literature through the mails." And T. W. Higginson joined the chorus of people predicting legal trouble for *Leaves of Grass*. The *Free Press*, *Catholic World*, and the *Chicago Tribune* were united in chastising Whitman for "beastliness."<sup>34</sup>

In March 1882 *Leaves of Grass* was officially designated as obscene literature by the district attorney of Boston, and the city's postmaster (temporarily) banned the book from the mails. Rees Welsh & Co. of Philadelphia (largely through the efforts of David McKay) stepped in quickly to publish *Leaves of Grass*, and the book sold well. On 12 August 1882, T. Francis Gordon offered in the *American* "views concerning the propriety of issuing the volume in its present shape." Gordon asserted that "good art" is the "noble expression of noble ideas" and that poetry such as "Children of Adam" displays a "realism [that] has no place in art." Lafcadio Hearn, in the New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, went farther and asserted that "'Children of Adam' . . . condemn[s] him beyond redemption." The Boston *Commonwealth*, however, argued that Whitman's claim to the rank of poet may be questionable, but "it is absurd . . . to rank the work as an obscene or reprehensible one in the broad and literal sense."<sup>35</sup>

The earliest review of *Specimen Days and Collect* appeared in the New York *Tribune*. Acknowledging Whitman's freshness and individuality, the *Tribune* nonetheless found that "no perfectly sane person" could conclude that "Whitman has any new message to deliver to the world." More appreciative reviews quickly followed, however. The Boston *Sunday Herald* reviewer felt that *Specimen Days* alone "would be enough to establish the author's fame as a great poet." The New York *Times* agreed that *Specimen Days* made an "important contribution to our literature." The reviewer joined others in noting that Whitman's prose is not sharply to be distinguished from his verse: More rhapsodist than poet, Whitman is most poetic when "inspired by night." The *Literary World*, in a contradictory manner, argued both that Whitman's



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prose is “interchangeable” with his poetry and that his “prose is better than his poetry. It is clear. It is sane. It is intelligible. It is often readable.” The *Critic*, in “Walt Whitman’s New Book,” focused on Whitman’s word “ensemble” as a key to his project. Here Whitman was seen as a great failure despite the admiration expressed for his development of an “elastic system of poetry-prose.”<sup>36</sup>

Many of the most important reviews of *Specimen Days* came from England. The *Westminster Review* observed that Whitman saw everything in two categories—democratic or feudal—and democracy seemed to exist nowhere but in the United States. The review, near its close, stated: “Our sense of the importance of the work has led us to extend to an undue length.” Edward Dowden commented on *Specimen Days and Collect for Academy* in 1882. This account describes (more than it evaluates) the volume. The tone, however, is favorable, and the piece closes with hope that Whitman will visit England, where he would receive “friendly greetings” from many of that nation’s literary figures. The *Spectator*, on the other hand, was sharply critical of Whitman’s “ignorance”: his “scrawled title-page, furnishes abundant evidence that its author knows next to nothing of the many things which he unhesitatingly exalts or denounces and that he has no adequate conception of the many problems he so confidently solves.”<sup>37</sup>

In the final years of his life, Whitman attained a degree of majesty and renown. This stature did not save him from criticism, but even his harshest critics in the 1880s and 1890s rarely matched the boiling fury of some of his early reviewers. Commentary on his final works was generally respectful, at times even adulatory. For example, Sylvester Baxter regarded Whitman’s *Complete Poems & Prose* (1888) as “a book to be prized by the bibliophile as well as treasured by Whitman’s friends.”<sup>38</sup>

The friends of *Leaves of Grass* came to include an increasing number of prominent writers. Oscar Wilde wrote a long and appreciative review of *November Boughs* for the *Pall Mall Gazette* in which he argued that “Whitman is at his best when he is analyzing his own work, and making schemes for the poetry of the future.” Another noteworthy author, Hamlin Garland, commented on *November Boughs* for the *Boston Evening Transcript*. He found it an “admirable book” and judged that the “number of people who begin to understand and admire this great personality is increasing.” Garland remarked that the “controversy about poetry is mostly a contention about a word.” What Garland called poetry someone else might call passionate descriptive speech, but the terminology “does not matter.” Howells, too, commented on *November Boughs*, registering a more positive opinion than he did of *Drum-Taps*: Whitman’s “literary intention was as generous as his spirit was bold, and . . . if he has not accomplished all he intended, he has been a force that is by no means spent.”<sup>39</sup>

Most other commentators on *November Boughs* either were negative or

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were relatively restrained in their praise. Many reviewers, whatever they thought of Whitman's work as a whole, recognized "A Backward Glance O'er Travell'd Roads" as a significant accomplishment. The *Saturday Review*, the *Critic*, and the *Scottish Review* were struck by the "singular modesty" and eloquence of "A Backward Glance." Yet some remained ready to dismiss Whitman: the *Literary World* declared that Whitman "has failed and failed lamentably in his attempt to construct a new technique in verse," and the San Francisco *Chronicle* predicted that *November Boughs* "will prove tedious to all except his admirers."<sup>40</sup>

The New York *Tribune* reviewed *Good-Bye My Fancy* on 16 August 1891. Though free of hostility, the review is nonetheless negative. For example, it asserts that "when Walt Whitman tries to be profound he commonly becomes unintelligible." The *Independent* was far harsher: "There is nothing of any value whatever in this book. . . . That the great magazines were right and Walt Whitman [*sic*] wrong the contents of this thin, crazy-quilt volume amply prove." Favorable reviews, however, outnumbered negative ones. Sidney Morse in the *Conservator* found that, despite Whitman's "strange form," his poems yielded "full satisfaction." The *Critic* added that in this volume "Whitman's beliefs come out singularly strong and triumphant." The *Literary News* also praised the work of the "grand old fellow." And the *Literary World* found *Good-Bye* to be both "very pathetic and courageous," closing his career "firmly and fitly."<sup>41</sup>

In one of his early anonymous reviews, Whitman claimed that he accepted with "easy nonchalance" the chances of his work's "present reception, and, through all misunderstandings and distrusts, the chances of its future reception." Actually, of course, he never relaxed about the fate of *Leaves of Grass*. As we have seen, he included press notices of his book in some of the later printings of the 1855 edition.<sup>42</sup> Whitman's own reviews should be seen both as a vital part of his overall project and as a characteristic effort to blur the boundaries of his text. Moreover, he reprinted the comments of several early reviewers in a section called "Opinions," appended to the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856) and again in a pamphlet of press notices entitled "*Leaves of Grass* Imprints" (1860), a brash effort to promote the third edition of his book. His fascination with reviews is apparent when we consider that he reviewed his book, reprinted his reviews (along with others), and then reviewed those reviews.<sup>43</sup>

The contemporary reviews were important to Whitman, but what do they say to us now? The reviews open up any number of intriguing questions, two of which bear mentioning here. First, the widespread conviction in the nineteenth century that there was a fundamental link between Tupper and Whitman deserves renewed consideration. At this particular moment in criticism, when popular and sentimental works are open for reevaluation, we can profit from a close look

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at the ground that both links and divides these two writers. A second feature of the reviews, running consistently from the opening review to the end of Whitman's career, is a tendency to highlight as having special poetic value Whitman's apostrophe to the "tender and growing night" in "Song of Myself" (section 21). Intriguingly, reviewers return again and again to the passage. Edward P. Mitchell observed that Whitman "exults in showing side by side the sublime or the beautiful that has always been acknowledged as such, and the sublime or the beautiful unacknowledged and unrecognized by everybody but himself."<sup>44</sup> Mitchell then contrasts section 21 of "Song of Myself" with the passage on the "calm and commanding" black drayman. Mitchell is right, of course, to suggest that the "tender and growing night" invokes standard visions of beauty, including moonlight and mottled water. These standard appeals no doubt go far toward accounting for the resonance the passage had for so many nineteenth-century readers. Nonetheless, there is an only partially submerged eroticism about the passage, too, an eroticism many of these reviewers objected to elsewhere, but which, in the right kind of context, they responded to despite themselves.

### Notes

- [Charles A. Dana], "New Publications: *Leaves of Grass*," *New York Daily Tribune*, 23 July 1855, p. 3, and *Life Illustrated*, 28 July 1855. The latter item is reprinted in James K. Wallace, "Whitman and *Life Illustrated*: A Forgotten Review of *Leaves*," *Walt Whitman Review*, 17 (December 1971), 135–8.
- [Charles Eliot Norton], *Putnam's Monthly*, 6 (September 1855), 321–3, and Edward Everett Hale, *North American Review*, 83 (January 1856), 275–7.
- "Notes on New Books," *Washington Daily National Intelligencer*, 18 February 1856, p. 2; Rufus Griswold, *Criterion*, 1 (10 November 1855), 24; Fanny Fern [Sara Payson Willis Parton], "Fresh Fern Leaves: *Leaves of Grass*," *New York Ledger*, 10 May 1856, p. 4.
- London Weekly Dispatch*, 9 March 1856, p. 6; *Saturday Review*, 1 (15 March 1856), 393–4; *Examiner*, 2512 (22 March 1856), 181. Comparisons of Whitman and Tupper appeared also in "Walt Whitman and His Critics," *Leader and Saturday Analyst*, 30 June 1860, pp. 614–15; "Leaves of Grass," *Literary Gazette*, n.s. 4 (7 July 1860), 798–9; *Saturday Review* (7 July 1860), 20; *Critic*, 21 (14 July 1860), 43–4; *Westminster Review*, 74, n.s. 18 (1 October 1860), 590; [Henry James], "Mr. Walt Whitman," *Nation*, 1 (16 November 1865), 625–6; "Walt Whitman's Poems," *Literary World*, 12 (19 November 1881), 411–12.
- "Transatlantic Latter-Day Poetry," *Leader*, 7 (7 June 1856), 547.
- Critic* [London], 15 (1 April 1856), 171. The reference to page 79 of the 1855 edition is to the untitled poem ultimately known as "I Sing the Body Electric."
- The poet did not invent the practice of self-reviewing, of course. Before writing *Leaves*, he clipped and carefully preserved an article about Leigh Hunt's analysis of his own poetry and the "same sort of self-criticism by other poets" (William R. Perkins Library, Duke University).
- For a discussion of this matter, see Onno Oerlemans, "Whitman and the Erotics of Lyric," *American Literature*, 65 (December 1993), 708.
- "An English and an American Poet," *American Phrenological Journal*, 22, no. 4 (October 1855), 90; "Walt Whitman and his Poems," *United States Review*, 5 (September 1855), 206; "Walt Whitman: A Brooklyn Boy," *Brooklyn Daily Times*, 29 September 1855, p. 2.

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- 10 The second edition contained much that was new, increasing the number of poems from twelve to thirty-two. Yet Whitman's decision to market twenty new works under an old title—to conceive of these works as an expansion or organic growth out of the first edition—apparently led people to view this as a repeat performance.
- 11 *Christian Examiner*, 60 (November 1856), 473, and “New Publications,” *Brooklyn Daily Times*, 17 December 1856.
- 12 This unorthodox promotional tactic was mentioned in other reviews also.
- 13 In conducting his detective work, the reviewer referred to the *American Phrenological Journal* and the *United States Review*.
- 14 These attacks began in “A Pleasant Quiz,” *Albion*, n.s. 14 (8 September 1855), 429. The *Saturday Review* strove to expose Whitman for violating literary etiquette: “Not only does the donor send us the book, but he favours us with hints—pretty broad hints—towards a favourable review of it. He has pasted in the first page a number of notices extracted with the scissors from American newspapers, and all magnificently eulogistic of *Leaves of Grass*.”
- 15 *New York Daily Times*, 13 November 1856, p. 2.
- 16 “Walt. Whitman's New Poem,” *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, 28 December 1859, reprinted in Thomas Ollive Mabbott and Rollo G. Silver, *A Child's Reminiscence by Walt Whitman* (Seattle: University of Washington Book Store, 1930), pp. 37–40.
- 17 A significant exception is “Walt Whitman and His Critics,” *Leader and Saturday Analyst*, 30 June 1860, 614–5. This piece was one of the earliest to differentiate the biographical Whitman from the poet's persona. The reviewer complained of other “critics, who treated the new author as one self-educated, yet in the rough, unpolished, and owing nothing to instruction. Fudge! The authority for so treating the author was derived from himself.” In addition, a careful distinction is drawn between “the individual writer, and . . . the subjective-hero supposed to be writing.”
- 18 “*Leaves of Grass*,” *Saturday Review*, 10 (7 July 1860), 19–20; *Westminster Review*, 74, n.s. 18 (1 October 1860), 590; and *Spectator*, 33 (14 July 1860), 669–70.
- 19 “New Publications: The New Poets,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1860 Supplement, p. 1; “Literature,” *Boston Banner of Light*, 7 (2 June 1860), 4.
- 20 [Moncure Conway], *Dial* (Cincinnati), 1 (August 1860), 519 and 517; and “Walt Whitman—*Leaves of Grass*,” *New York Saturday Press*, 19 May 1860, p. 2.
- 21 [A. S. Hill], *North American Review*, 104 (January 1867), 301.
- 22 Specifically, *Watson's Weekly Art Journal* of 4 November 1865 found “greater regularity of rhythm, and more unity of conception in the grouping of details” (35).
- 23 “*Drum-Taps*—Walt Whitman,” *Watson's Weekly Art Journal*, 4 November 1865, p. 34; “Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*,” *The Radical*, 1 (March 1866), 311; John Burroughs, “Walt Whitman and His ‘*Drum-Taps*,’” *Galaxy*, 2 (1 December 1866), 612.
- 24 “Walt Whitman's *Drum Taps*,” *New York Times*, 22 November 1865, p. 4; W[illiam] D[ean] H[owells], “*Drum-Taps*,” *Round Table*, 2 (11 November 1865), 147–8; [Henry James], “Mr. Walt Whitman,” *Nation*, 1 (16 November 1865), 625.
- 25 Robert Buchanan, “Walt Whitman,” *Broadway Magazine*, 1 (November 1867), 188–95, and J[ohn] B[urroughs], “Literary Review,” *Boston Commonwealth*, 10 November 1867, pp. 1–2.
- 26 With the exception of Edward Dowden's long article in the *Westminster Review* (July 1871), the only item that could be construed to be a review of *Democratic Vistas* did not appear until 30 June 1888. The latter item, by Walter Lewin, is a review of an anthology entitled *Democratic Vistas and Other Papers*, a reprinting intended for the British public.
- 27 For a discussion of Whitman's publishing practices, see Joel Myerson, “Whitman: Bibliography as Biography,” in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), pp. 19–29.
- 28 *London Sunday Times*, 29 March 1868, p. 7; *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, 19 April 1868, p. 8; “Walt Whitman's Poems,” *London Sun*, 17 April 1868, p. 31490.

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- 29 *Saturday Review*, 25 (2 May 1868), 590.
- 30 "Walt Whitman's Poems," *Saturday Review*, 25 (2 May 1868), 590; "Walt Whitman," *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Art*, 45 (4 July 1868), 420.
- 31 Edmund W. Gosse, "Walt Whitman's New Book," *Academy*, 9 (24 June 1876), 602–3; J. H. McCarthy, "Songs Overseas," *Examiner*, 3586 (21 October 1876), 1192; W. Hale White, "The Genius of Walt Whitman," *Secular Review*, 20 March 1880, p. 180.
- 32 "Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the Future," *New York Sun*, 19 November 1881, p. 2; "Leaves of Grass," *Liberty*, 1 (26 November 1881), 3; "Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass,'" *Critic* [New York], 1 (5 November 1881), 302–3.
- 33 [Francis F. Browne], "Briefs on New Books," *The Dial* [Chicago], 2 (January 1882), 218–19; "Walt Whitman's Poems," *Literary World*, 12 (19 November 1881), 411–12.
- 34 "New Publications," *Detroit Free Press*, 7 January 1882, p. 3; "The Poetry of the Future," *New York Examiner*, 19 January 1882, p. 1; [T. W. Higginson], "Recent Poetry," *Nation*, 33 (15 December 1881), 476–7; "Leaves of Grass," *Catholic World*, 34 (February 1882), 720; "Walt Whitman's Claim to be Considered a Great Poet," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 November 1881, p. 9.
- 35 T. Francis Gordon, "Walt Whitman's Complete Volume," *American*, 2 (12 August 1882), 282; [Lafcadio Hearn], "Leaves of Grass!" *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, 30 July 1882, p. 4; Boston *Commonwealth*, 2 September 1882, p. 1.
- 36 "New Publications," *New York Tribune*, 14 October 1882, p. 6; "Whitman's New Book," *Boston Sunday Herald*, 15 October 1882, p. 9; "New Publications: Walt Whitman's Prose," *New York Times*, 18 December 1882, p. 2; "All About Walt Whitman," *Literary World*, 13 (4 November 1882), 372; "Walt Whitman's New Book," *Critic* [New York], 3 (13 January 1883), 2–3.
- 37 *Westminster Review*, n.s. 64 (July 1883), 291; Edward Dowden, *Academy*, 22 (18 November 1882), 357–9; "Walt Whitman's Prose Works," *Spectator*, 21 July 1883, p. 934.
- 38 [Sylvester Baxter], "Whitman's Complete Works," *Boston Herald*, 3 January 1889, p. 4.
- 39 [Oscar Wilde], "The Gospel According to Walt Whitman," *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 January 1889, p. 3; Hamlin Garland, "Whitman's *November Boughs*," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 15 November 1888, p. 6; [William Dean Howells], "Editor's Study," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 78 (February 1889), 488.
- 40 "November Boughs," *Saturday Review*, 67 (2 March 1889), 260–1; W. Harrison, "Walt Whitman's 'November Boughs,'" *Critic* [New York], n.s. 11 (19 January 1889), 25; *Scottish Review*, 14 (July 1889), 212; "Whitman's *November Boughs*," *Literary World*, 19 (8 December 1888), 446; "November Boughs," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 January 1889, p. 7.
- 41 "Whitman's Farewell: A Melancholy Book," *New York Tribune*, 16 August 1891, p. 14; *Independent*, 43 (10 September 1891), 1355; Sidney Morse, "The Second Annex to *Leaves of Grass*," *Conservator*, 2 (September 1891), 51–2; "Good-Bye My Fancy!" *Critic* [New York], n.s. 16 (5 September 1891), 114; *Literary News*, n.s. 12 (September 1891), 282; "Good-Bye My Fancy," *Literary World*, 22 (12 September 1891), 305.
- 42 The book was bound at four different times.
- 43 Whitman, who saved many press clippings about *Leaves* all his life, employed these reviews again when he coordinated (anonymously) Appendix II of Richard Maurice Bucke's *Walt Whitman*, entitled "Contemporaneous Notices, 1855 to 1883." For Whitman's review of "Leaves of Grass Imprints," see "A Brooklynite Criticised," *Brooklyn City News*, 10 October 1860, reprinted in facsimile in *Walt Whitman's Autograph Revision of the Analysis of Leaves of Grass*, ed. Stephen Railton (New York: New York University Press, 1974), p. 144.
- 44 "Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the Future," *New York Sun*, 19 November 1881, p. 2.

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# Editorial Note and Acknowledgments

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This volume reprints most of the contemporary reviews of Walt Whitman's works. These reviews, a good window for viewing his immediate critical reception, are generally reproduced in full. In those cases where part of a review has been omitted, the ellipsis has been marked within square brackets. Unbracketed ellipsis dots appear in the original reviews. For clarity's sake, I identify Whitman's poems by using his familiar final titles, as is conventional in Whitman studies.

I thank Joel Myerson of the University of South Carolina for help in procuring illustrations for this volume. Most of the illustrations are drawn from his *Walt Whitman: A Descriptive Bibliography* and are reproduced by courtesy of the University of Pittsburgh Press. Thanks also go to the Tracy W. McGregor Library, Rare Books Department, University of Virginia Library, and to the William D. Bayley Walt Whitman Collection, Ohio Wesleyan University, for photographs of *Poems by Walt Whitman* (1868) and *Complete Poems & Prose of Walt Whitman* (1888), respectively.

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