The Cambridge Introduction to
Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman is one of the most innovative and influential American poets of the nineteenth century. Focusing on his masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*, this book provides a foundation for the study of Whitman as an experimental poet, a radical democrat, and a historical personality in the era of the American Civil War, the growth of the great cities, and the westward expansion of the United States. Always a controversial and important figure, Whitman continues to attract the admiration of poets, artists, critics, political activists, and readers around the world. Those studying his work for the first time will find this an invaluable book. Alongside close readings of the major texts, chapters on Whitman’s biography, the history and culture of his time, and the critical reception of his work provide a comprehensive understanding of Whitman and of how he has become such a central figure in the American literary canon.

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Preface

Walt Whitman (1819–92) is generally regarded as one of the two most innovative and influential US poets of the nineteenth century (the other is Emily Dickinson). A powerful voice for democracy, a bold innovator in verse form, the controversial “poet of the body,” and the consummate individualist who dared to proclaim “I celebrate myself,” Whitman continues to attract the admiration of poets, artists, critics, mystics, political activists, and adventurous readers around the world.

This book serves as an introductory guide for students and first-time readers of Whitman. It covers the style and ideas of the poetry (Chapters 3 and 4) as well as the major prose writings (Chapter 5). It also contextualizes Whitman’s writing and thought with short chapters on biography (Chapter 1), history and culture (Chapter 2), and the critical reception of the work from its first publication to the present (Chapter 6). The book is designed to be read from start to finish for readers needing a fast overview, but the various parts stand more or less on their own. The one exception to this general rule is that readers primarily interested in the study of individual poems should first read the treatment of “Song of Myself” in Chapter 3 to gain an understanding of Whitman’s most important themes and experiments in poetic form. Readings of other poems tend to refer back to this foundational treatment.

To promote readability, citations of secondary critical and biographical works are kept to a minimum and critical controversies are sometimes simplified. A select annotated bibliography, limited mainly to books still in print, is provided for the reader who wishes to take the next step in Whitman studies. In the interest of simplifying references to the many editions and versions of Whitman’s writings, citations in the discussions of Whitman’s works in all chapters refer as much as possible to a single source, selected for its range, dependability, and accessibility. This is the Library of America edition of Whitman’s Complete Poetry and Collected Prose (1982). Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical references cite this edition by page number. Although I will be treating the poems in their order of original publication, beginning with those dating from 1855, I will be using the best-known titles and texts of the poems,
the ones that appeared in the 1891–2 Deathbed Edition of *Leaves of Grass*, largely because these are the titles and texts most available to current readers. Readers interested in the changes Whitman made in each edition – which are considerable and which have stimulated some excellent work in bibliography and textual criticism – should consult the online *Walt Whitman Archive* edited by Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, an essential resource in Whitman studies.

I wish to thank Ray Ryan and the staff at Cambridge University Press for inviting me to contribute to this series of literary introductions and for all their help in producing the book. I am also grateful to those who have read the manuscript and offered valuable suggestions, notably Pete Messent (for the Press), Nicole DuPlessis, Steve Marsden, and my distinguished colleague at Texas A&M University, Jerome Loving. Thanks also go to my wife and frequent co-author Jacqueline Palmer and my daughter Myrth Killingsworth for their editorial help and to Myrth’s friends at Rice University, Birte Wehmeier and Matilda Young, who served as trial readers early in the project.