

Poets To Come:
Walt Whitman in the American Protest Literature Tradition



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Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for;
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental,
 greater than before known,
Arouse! Arouse—for you must justify me—you must answer.
I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back
 in the darkness.
I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping,
 turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
Expecting the main things from you.
 [Walt Whitman, 1871]

On November 18, 1995, the violinist Itzhak Perlman broke a string during a concert at the Lincoln Center. He carried on to the end, modulating his piece, and then told the rapturous audience: “You know, sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.”

Across American history, asking America to *be* America, protest writers and artists have tried to remake their country. Living in a partially achieved nation, they took on “a role beyond that of entertainer,” as Ralph Ellison explained in 1967. Ellison added: “American fiction has played a special role in the development of the American nation.” Protesting the failed promises of the democratic experiment, artists rewrote its blueprints—sensing, like Ellison’s character in *Juneteenth* (1999), ““that in this great, inventive land man’s idlest dreams are but the blueprints and mockups of emerging realities.””¹

They often rewrote these democratic blueprints with the material of earlier protest movements. Protest literature became a kind of radical *bricolage*—ideas, images and language stored across time, then transformed by new contexts into a living protest legacy. As though

answering Walt Whitman's call to "justify me and answer what I am for," protest artists and writers have salvaged pieces of earlier reform movements. Like Perlman, they have made new art with what was "left."

Some appropriated material as protest for the first time, like the lynching photographs collected by James Allen for *Without Sanctuary* (2000). Other pieces of literature, like James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), were initially ignored but taken up during a later protest moment: *Famous Men* was popular with white voter-registration volunteers in Mississippi during the early 1960s. Still others took on a life of their own: Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) gave rise to the 1906 Food and Drugs and Meat Inspection Acts, though it was intended to help create a new socialist world. And protest texts evolved in new climates: Frederick Douglass rewrote the early parts of his autobiography; new stanzas were added to Ralph Chaplin's labor song "Solidarity Forever" (1915); Tillie Olsen eliminated her gendered language of 1961 in the 1989 edition of *Tell Me a Riddle*, to incorporate a new feminist consciousness; and the New Black Panther Party adopted the Black Panther Party's "Ten Point Program" (1966) but included new demands in their 2001 version.

The creation of protest literature has been a folk process: old tunes with new words in new circumstances. Numerous writers echoed and revised the Declaration of Independence. Sinclair claimed abolitionism as an early form of socialism, and later compared the protest literature of the 1930s to the abolitionist movement. He set out to write the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of wage slavery. Eugene Debs looked to the abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips as his heroes and demanded a John Brown for wage slavery. The John Brown Song was rewritten by Chaplin as "Solidarity Forever" and the 1980s anti-racist group John Brown Anti-Klan Committee called upon Brown as well. Michael Harrington, who took up Jacob Riis' idea of "the other half," was often introduced as "the author of *The Other America*, the book that

sparked the war on poverty,” echoing Abraham Lincoln’s claim that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel had started a big war, while the folk singer Country Joe reversed Lincoln’s comment in claiming to be the singer that *stopped* the Vietnam war. The documentary fiction of Sinclair and Agee influenced the Vietnam-era New Journalism of Michael Herr and Norman Mailer, and Mailer’s celebration of obscenity found new life in Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (1998), which said the unsayable. Farm Security Administration photographers returned to Lewis Hine’s survey-tradition, and Evans’ Alabama child-subjects were the visual descendents of Hine’s factory children.

These connections gave courage. “If the house is not yet finished, / Don’t be discouraged, builder!” wrote Langston Hughes in his 1943 poem “Freedom’s Plow”; “The plan and the pattern is here, / Woven from the beginning / Into the warp and woof of America.” People had passed this way before. And, building on the palpable past of American protest literature, artists chose and reshaped their ancestry to emphasize a tradition of patriotic protest. “We do not even know that the literature of America is above everything else a literature of protest and of rebellion,” complained Floyd Dell in 1930; “not knowing the past, we cannot learn by its mistakes.... We only slowly come to learn that what we sometimes contemptuously call ‘American’ is not American at all: that it is, astonishingly enough, *we* who are American: that Debs and Haywood are as American as Franklin and Lincoln.”²

Recycling and reusing the literature of earlier protest movements in this way, writers and artists debunked the myth of American history as a series of fresh starts—of America as a perpetual New World. Excavating and reconstructing, they fought attempts to stamp out the country’s radical past. They refused to discard history or participate in the “sloughing of the old skin, towards a new youth,” termed “the true myth of America” by D.H. Lawrence. And protest writers also disproved the particularly pervasive idea that writing on the Left is without memory,

never putting down roots. Though they sought and found new countries, then set sail for better ones, many artists carried fragments along.³

One important fragment was Walt Whitman. “Stonewall didn’t just happen,” declared *Homosexuals Intransigent!* president Craig Schoonmaker in a 1979 pamphlet; “[it] grew out of a change in society and a change in us which brave men worked two decades to achieve. Gay Liberation rose at Stonewall from a launch pad created 20 years earlier by men of inspiring courage who dared, in the Fifties, to speak the unspeakable.” Ginsberg was one of those men. His poem “Howl” shattered the stifling silence of the 1950s. The poem’s descriptions of gay sex meant it was confiscated as obscene material, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg’s publisher, was arrested on a charge of publishing obscene books. But when the censors lost their trial, the way was opened for more literature of homosexual love and sex. Ginsberg observed in an interview a few years later: “The problem... is this. We all talk among ourselves... and we talk about our assholes, and we talk about our cocks... or when we stuck a broom in our ass in the Hotel Ambassador in Prague—anybody tells one’s friends about that. So then—what happens if you make a distinction between what you tell your friends and what you tell your Muse?” The solution, he said, was to collapse the distinction, and “approach the Muse to talk as frankly as you would talk with yourself or with your friends.”⁴

Ginsberg rejected rigid form as well as restrictive content—releasing poetry from its closet. He believed poetry and music were two forms of communication not controlled by the establishment, and first unleashed “Howl” at a gathering in San Francisco, in October 1955. Halfway through the reading, Jack Kerouac, who was sitting in the front row, began chanting “Go! Go!”, ecstatically punctuating Ginsberg’s poem: the poem was a communal, oral event, so breaking down the dichotomies of oral/written and individual/community. “Howl”—like Ginsberg’s own fluid sexuality and persona—also broke down dichotomies of male/female,

flesh/spirit, good/evil, sacred/profane, madness/sanity, the mystical/the everyday. Ginsberg then bridged another gap, between the 1950s Beat movement and the 1960s hippies and radicals: he marched for Civil Rights, against the Vietnam War, and with the Black Panthers.

One passage in “Howl” directly echoes Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Whitman had written: “Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from; / The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer,” and Ginsberg now wrote: “Holy! Holy! Holy! The world is holy! The skin is holy! The tongue is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!” Whitman was much more than a footnote in gay history, though summoned here in the “Footnote” to “Howl.” Ginsberg later quoted these lines from *Leaves of Grass* in a lecture, and made the same observation of Whitman that gay rights activists made of *him*: “Whitman opened up a lot of political space, simply by changing the poetry from a very fixed and classical form, to an open form that anybody could participate in.” He quoted *Leaves of Grass* at length (“Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!”), and then said: “Whitman broke out of centuries of formalistic speech and repression of consciousness, repression of erotic consciousness, sensory consciousness.” In 1951 Donald Cory had made a similar point, asking of Whitman: “was he able to break the chains of traditional verse forms because his mind had been forced to question all pre-conceived concepts?.... Was he able to imbue America with a spirit of democracy because he found a great need for a society that would accept the non-conforming minority viewpoint?” Now, citing one line in particular, Ginsberg noted: “you have in Whitman, ‘Through me voices of centuries of interminable repression and lust.’”⁵

Whitman had sensed earlier voices, and now Ginsberg listened back to *Whitman’s* voice. He believed Whitman had been crucial to America’s psychological development, and took up his challenge to embrace natural ecstasy, accept oneself, and believe in the truth of feelings. He

featured him in “A Supermarket in California” (1955) as “dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher,” and in his poem “Siesta in Xbalba” (1963) as well. At one point he claimed Whitman as a lover several times removed, telling a *Gay Sunshine* interviewer that he slept with Neal Cassady, who slept with Gavin Arthur, who slept with Edward Carpenter, who slept with Whitman.

As he had anticipated, Whitman was underfoot of American protest writers: “If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles... I stop somewhere waiting for you,” he wrote in *Leaves of Grass*. Now he appeared in James Weldon Johnson’s preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), Kenneth Rexroth’s *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* (1944), Langston Hughes’ “Old Walt” (1954), Paul Zimmer’s “Leaves of Zimmer” (1976), Perry Brass’ “Walt Whitman in 1989” (1989) and Sherman Alexie’s “Defending Walt Whitman” (1996) and “Song of Ourselves” (1996). In his 1990 poem, “Walt Whitman’s Brain Dropped on Laboratory Floor” (1990), Thomas Lux insisted: “That our nation does not care does not matter, much. / That his modest federal job was taken from him, / and thus his pension, does not matter at all. / And that his brain was dropped and shattered, a cosmos, / on the floor, matters even less.”

Whitman’s “cosmos” was particularly important to the laboratory floor of the gay protest tradition, beyond Ginsberg and Cory. Gay rights activists called their first reading of his poetry a turning-point, or expressed hope that his vision of men walking hand in hand might come to pass. Others remembered that *Leaves of Grass* had surfaced in their minds during sexual experiences. The late nineteenth century was termed the “First Gay Liberation Movement,” Whitman was claimed as a prophet of gay rights, and his poems were read aloud at Gay Liberation Front meetings in the early 1970s. He had claimed homosexual love as fundamental to democracy, rather than calling for minority equal rights, but 1960s and 1970s activists found inspiration in the Calamus poems (“his arm lay lightly around my breast—And that night I was

happy”); “I Sing the Body Electric” (“You would wish long and long to be with him ... you would wish to sit by him in the boat that you and he might touch each other”); “Once I Pass’d Through A Populous City” (“Day by day and night by night we were together — all else has long been forgotten by me, I remember I saw only that man who passionately clung to me”); and “Song of Myself” (“I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning; / You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over / upon me, / And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone”).

In 1966 Dave Rich addressed Whitman directly, referencing “Song of Myself”: “You tried to speak to us once, / About something you discovered in the June grass, / Something precious and warm and pulsating, / Beating with the beat which is wild with love.” The May 1978 edition of the H2IQ newsletter, *HII!*, then offered Whitman’s “Gods” as inspiration: “Lover divine and perfect Comrade... the Ideal Man... Be thou my God.” And in the 1980s and 1990s one of Whitman’s promises was painfully resonant for AIDS protest writers: “I shall be good health to you nevertheless, / And filter and fibre your blood.” In Tony Kushner’s 1991 play *Perestroika*, the Angel echoes Whitman, telling Prior, “I stop down the road, waiting for you.”⁶

Gay rights pioneer Jack Nichols often referred to himself as Whitman’s spiritual child. He called *Leaves of Grass* his Bible and Whitman the fountainhead of the gay rights movement. Nichols co-founded the Mattachine Societies of Washington, D.C. (1961) and Florida (1965), organized the Mattachine’s first demonstration at the White House on April 17, 1965, and edited *GAY*, America’s first gay weekly newspaper, from 1969 to 1973. He published several articles on Whitman in *GAY*, then used a quotation from Whitman for the epigraph to his co-authored book with Lige Clarke, *I Have More Fun with You Than Anybody* (1972)—the first non-fiction memoir by a male couple. In March 1973 he told his audience at the Annual Conference on World Affairs to read *Leaves of Grass* and feel its love of man for men, and in 1981 he told the

Texas Gay Conference that the movement had radical potential for it had been nurtured over the past 100 years. The century separating Whitman from Stonewall seemed suddenly short.

Into the 1990s, Nichols continued to celebrate Whitman for the gay liberation movement. In an article for *Gay Today* in May 1997, Nichols recalled that Clarke had often whispered lines from Whitman if gay activists began to argue. He remembered that in the 1970s he and Clarke had “determined we’d not sit in a dark corner, hugging each other like frightened monkeys, afraid to let each other walk freely into realms of spontaneous experience,” so turned to the counsels of Whitman, and began to celebrate the “primacy of self-love,” armed with “Song of Myself” and “Song of the Open Road.” Now he made a plea to keep Whitman alive, and quoted his lines, “Affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet.” He concluded: “I can hear him now, speaking in the midst of the AIDS crisis, he who once traversed bloody battlefields as a male nurse.” Whitman still called, wrote Nichols, “from the vapor and the dusk.”⁷

Most recently, however, as battlefields loomed again in 2003, Whitman’s call has resounded through anti-war protest writing. Jim Harrison concluded his “Poem of War,” dated February 13, 2003, with a message from Whitman: “René Char asked, ‘Who stands on the gangplank / directing operations, the captain or the rats?’ / Whitman said, ‘so many young throats / choked on their own blood.’ God says nothing.” Harrison contributed the poem to *Poets Against the War*, formed in response to Laura Bush’s symposium on “Poetry and the American Voice.” Scheduling it for February 12, 2003, she invited poets to take tea in the White House rose-garden and discuss Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, and Walt Whitman. Sam Hamill received an invitation, and on January 26, 2003, he emailed 50 other poets, explaining that he had felt “a kind of nausea” when he read it. Only the day before he had heard about George Bush’s proposed “Shock and Awe” attack on Iraq, and he said in his email that “the only legitimate response to such a morally bankrupt and unconscionable idea is to reconstitute a Poets

Against the War movement like the one organized to speak out against the war in Vietnam.” He asked all poets to forward his email and make February 12 a day of Poetry Against the War. He intended to compile a protest anthology, and present it to Laura Bush. Within three days he had received 1,500 responses.

Mrs. Bush shut down the symposium, and on January 29 her office issued a statement: “While Mrs. Bush respects the right of all Americans to express their opinions, she, too, has opinions and believes it would be inappropriate to turn a literary event into a political forum.” In response to the cancellation, poets pointed to a climate of anti-intellectualism, a desire for uncomplicated truths, and a reluctance to engage in dialogue. The cancellation seemed to suggest that poetry and politics don’t mix, while they believed poetry was a vital part of America’s sociological and political self. Poetry could be a call-to-arms, but also a voice of caution or reason, they noted—it is suspicious of jargon, cuts through the banality of arguments for war, subverts clichés and names things clearly. Whitman and Hughes, two of the poets chosen for discussion by Mrs. Bush, were among America’s greatest protest writers, they added, some quoting Whitman’s line, “Resist much, obey little.” They pointed to a long tradition of moral opposition by artists.

Banished from the White House rose-garden, Hamill and Poets Against the War helped organize hundreds of poetry readings, many scheduled for February 12, the day of the cancelled symposium. On February 17, 2000, people went to the Lincoln Center for an evening called “Poems Not Fit for the White House.” Galway Kinnell, State Poet of Vermont, read Whitman’s lines: “Who are they as bats and nightdogs askant in the capital, / What a filthy presidential, / Are those really congressmen? / Are those the great judges? / Is that the president?” The following evening Bush announced that to listen to anti-war protesters would be like “deciding foreign policy based on a focus group.” Hamill created a web-site for the poems. By March 1,

2003, more than 13,000 poems were posted on the Poets Against the War site, and it now boasts a collection of 20,000. He then delivered 13,000 to Congress, and many entered the Congressional Record. Never had poets made a difference like this, Hamill said, observing that this was the largest group of poets to speak in a single voice in recorded history. Ferlinghetti, who published *Howl* in 1956, and founded the City Lights Bookstore, a center for Beat writers in the 1950s, contributed a poem.

Another poet invited to the White House event was former Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky. He replied to Laura Bush: “In our current political situation I am unwilling to participate in a Washington event that invokes an ‘American voice’ in the singular.” He explained that it was impossible “to participate in a poetry symposium that speaks of ‘the’ American voice, in the house of authority I mistrust, on the verge of a questionable war... the more so when I remember the candid, rebellious, individualistic voices of Dickinson, Whitman, Langston Hughes.” Then, in July 2005, the *Washington Post* invited Pinsky to help compose a “new Pledge of Allegiance” for their features page. Declining, he wrote back: “I love our imperfect country, and I love it partly for the ideal of respect for differences, the dignity of the unique individual. No communal incantation can embody that ideal. I don’t believe that I got much from chanting sentences of allegiance in school each morning. Patriotism is not the same as piety. My classmates and I would have been better off, and it would be more in the best American spirit, if the teacher had read a different passage from *Leaves of Grass* each morning.” In an interview, he observed: “Great rhetoric may talk as though there is only politics. Great erotic passion may talk as though there is only eros. Poetry, in contrast with these, somehow acknowledges or implies the All... It excludes nothing. Irritably, it looks beyond everything.” Echoing Whitman’s “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes),” he explained that poetry welcomes conflict and paradox, and “creates an experience that reminds us of

something beyond any particular feelings and ideas: always beyond, always in process, always headed somewhere new.” In the hands of poets like Whitman and Ginsberg, Pinsky added, poetry didn’t describe the world as it is, but tried to “bring about by words the world as it potentially, maybe essentially, can be.”⁸

“Through me forbidden voices.” Across American protest literature, Whitman’s anticipated “poets to come” have spoken through him and reached for this world as it “can be.” They have justified and answered his call, taking up his “indicative words for the future.” The touchstone of their literature has been democracy, and one touchstone of American democracy has been Whitman’s democratic fictions.

¹ Ralph Ellison, “The Novel as a Function of American Democracy” (1967), *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 767; Ellison, *Juneteenth* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 17. For one example of a protest writer explicitly “asking America to be America,” see James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook” (1962), *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 10: “we can make America what America must become.”

² Floyd Dell, *The Liberator*, III, January 1920, 46.

³ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923, Garden City: Doubleday, 1953), 64. See Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”: “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which humanity is always landing. And when humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias,” *The Fortnightly Review* (February 1891): 290.

⁴ Craig Schoonmaker, “Messages on the Occasion of the Washington March, October 14, 1979,” pamphlet handed out at the Gay March on Washington of October 14, 1979 by Homosexuals Intransigent!; Allen Ginsberg, interview with Thomas Clark, in *The Paris Review*, 37, “The Art of Poetry, no.8” (Spring 1966): 10.

⁵ Donald Cory (pseudonym), *The Homosexual in America* (New York: Greenberg, 1951), 165; Ginsberg, “Revolutionary Poetics” (1989), in Anne Waldman and Lisa Birman (eds.), *Civil Disobediences* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004), 244, 252-3, 256.

⁶ Dave Rich, untitled poem, in Tove Neville (ed.), *Poems Read in the Spirit of Peace and Gladness* (San Francisco: Peace & Gladness Co-op Press, 1966), 13; Tony Kushner, *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 46.

⁷ Jack Nichols, “I’ve Been Talking About You, Walt Whitman,” *Gay Today*, May 19, 1997: n.p.

⁸ Robert Pinsky, letters from personal correspondence with Zoe Trodd (07/05/05), and comments from an interview with Zoe Trodd (08/03/05).

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