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WHITMAN, TWAIN, AND THE "UNKILLABLE" *LEAVES OF GRASS*

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We scarcely need to be reminded that book banning and censorship are facts of life in America. In our schools and libraries the vigilance committees, more ideological and organized and therefore more menacing than ever before, are doing their old work again. Today their targets are books by J. D. Salinger, Bernard Malamud, Kurt Vonnegut, John Irving, and Studs Terkel, even *The American Heritage Dictionary* (because it faithfully records certain commonly used expressions). Around a century ago the vigilantes chose for their targets two books which now represent America and American literature to the entire world: Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

In 1885 the trustees of the Concord (Massachusetts) Public Library expelled Mark Twain's novel from their shelves on the grounds that it was "trash and suitable only for the slums." (Mark Twain's shrewd response was, "That will sell 25,000 copies for us sure.") His great novel subsequently has come under attack not only for its alleged coarseness, vulgarity, and irreverence, but also for its alleged "racism," the latter a charge which altogether disregards Mark Twain's moral passion and basic intention. Probably he would not have enjoyed being yoked with his older contemporary, the reprobate poet Walt Whitman, of Camden, New Jersey. But just three years before the Concord Library expelled *Huckleberry Finn* the Boston District Attorney put the publishers of *Leaves of Grass* under official notice that certain poems fell within provisions of "Public Statutes respecting obscene literature." He suggested "the propriety of withdrawing the same from circulation and suppressing the editions thereof."

In 1855 one reviewer dismissed *Leaves of Grass* as "a mass of stupid filth." Ten years later the authorship of this book cost Whitman his clerkship at the Department of the Interior in Washington. By the standards laid down by the Secretary, James Harlan, *Leaves of Grass*

was in violation of the “decorum and propriety prescribed by a Christian Civilization.” At different times, but with different degrees of success, Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Michael Rossetti urged Whitman to expurgate *Leaves of Grass*. “The dirtiest book in all the world is the expurgated book,” Whitman said. “Expurgation is apology—yes, surrender—yes, an admission that something or other was wrong. Emerson said expurgate—I said no.” Nevertheless, he knew from experience “what it means to be a horror in the sight of the people about you.”

By the time the Boston District Attorney issued his warning, Whitman had spent nearly a quarter of a century in the doghouse of polite letters and was almost resigned to remaining there. Still, he refused to yield to the demands that he delete certain specified poems and passages. Whitman took his book away from its Boston publishers and brought it to another house, this one in Philadelphia. As a consequence of having been banned in Boston *Leaves of Grass* even enjoyed a flurry of sales, just as *Huckleberry Finn* did. “As to this last and in some sense most marked buffeting in the fortunes of *Leaves of Grass*,” Whitman reflected at the time, “I tickle myself with the thought how it may be said years hence that . . . *no book on earth ever had such a history.*”

For today’s readers and censors one question that should be asked is this: What was there in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Leaves of Grass* that offended so many people in the course of a century or more? What was so threatening about these books?

The official answers, the answers given at the time, are for the most part superficial, what Whitman might call “a screen.” Yes, *Huckleberry Finn* violated genteel standards of social and literary decorum. Instead of refined language, an exemplary hero, and an elevating moral, readers of Mark Twain’s novel encountered a novel written in the idiom of a shiftless, unlettered boy, son of the town drunkard. Huck is the hero and narrator of a book that ridicules the work ethic, democratic consensus, property rights, polite manners, the Bible, prayer, and pious sentiments in general, characterized as “tears and flapdoodle,” “soul-butter and hogwash.” And yes, *Leaves of Grass* treated nakedness, sexuality, and bodily function, with a frankness and joy that offended prudes and moralists. How else could a cultured

reader, man or woman, already put off by Whitman’s lawless meters and elastic morals, respond to his references to “stalwart loins,” “love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching,” “limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous,” “phallic thumb of love,” “bellies pressed and glued together with love”?

But these two books also contained a deeper level of threat and affront. Whitman once described *Leaves of Grass* as “only a language experiment . . . an attempt to give the spirit, the body, the man, new words, new potentialities of speech.” The poet, Whitman said, must be able to make words “sing, dance, kiss, do the male and female act . . . do anything that man or woman or the natural powers can do.” He believed his mission as poet was to speak for the dumb, the ignorant, the criminal, for the democratic mass that had no tongue—to teach the average man and woman the glory of their daily walk and occupation. The poet was to be hero and lawgiver, priest and shaman of modern civilization, a prophet who judges “not as the judge judges but as the sun falling round a helpless thing.” “He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet,” Whitman announced in 1855. “He says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you . . . he places himself where the future becomes present.”

Huckleberry Finn is Mark Twain’s own “language experiment”—it raises the colloquial speech of an illiterate boy to the level of literature. “All American writing comes from that,” Ernest Hemingway said about *Huckleberry Finn*. Emerson made much the same claim for *Leaves of Grass* when he welcomed it as “the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom America has yet contributed.” By giving expression to the inexpressible and the forbidden, both of these “language experiments” advanced a moral as well as a literary revolution. No one who truly responds to Huck’s struggles with his conscience over right and wrong, freedom and slavery, humanity and racism, will ever again accept without question the conventional wisdom of the time and place they inhabit. And neither will anyone who truly responds to Whitman’s underlying purpose in *Leaves of Grass*. He created a radical book and a radical consciousness. “I know I am restless and make others so,” he wrote. “I know my words are weapons, full of danger, full of death, / For I confront peace, security, and all the settled laws to unsettle them.” Perhaps the censors were really on to something, after all.

Leaves of Grass and *Huckleberry Finn* have the power of great literature to disorient, surprise, and delight, shock and renew, alter our notion of reality. This is in part why they have endured so well and so long and survived attempts made on their lives. They have been read, and are being read, in virtually every tongue spoken on the globe. In Soviet Russia Whitman is the subject of serious (although politically tendentious) critical and biographical study. Along with Mark Twain, Poe, and Jack London he is published in the People's Republic of China. An eminent woman scholar there who, after translating T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, was forced to work in the fields during Mao Tse-tung's Cultural Revolution, is now translating all of *Leaves of Grass* into Chinese. I am not so sure this is a great idea—more may add up to less. However, China, like self-contradictory Whitman himself, is large and contains multitudes. It may absorb even all of him affectionately.

“Poets to come!” Whitman had written. “I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future . . . Leaving it to you to prove and define it, / Expecting the main things *from you*.” He fulfilled the promise of romanticism while pointing to the open roof of modernist form, vision, and experiment. His powerful, imperial presence asserts itself in the work of poets who came after him—Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, and the generation of Allen Ginsberg and successors.

In the United States, about thirty different editions of *Leaves of Grass* are currently in print, a contrast with the time, not so long ago, when Whitman had difficulty finding even one publisher for his work. This total includes the variorum edition which culminates the New York University Press's monumental, multi-volume series, *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, a long-term publishing venture launched in 1963. The Library of America's *Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, published in 1982, is the most inclusive one-volume edition in existence. It contains, in addition to Whitman's *Specimen Days* and other prose writings, two dramatically different states of *Leaves of Grass*. The first is the 96-page volume—twelve untitled poems and a long prose preface—that Whitman published himself, and even set some type for, in Brooklyn, in 1855, at the beginning of his career. The second is the so-called “Deathbed” edition of 1891-92, a volume of nearly 500 pages, published in Philadelphia. This text

represents the final stage of *Leaves of Grass*, a growing, changing book that Whitman variously compared with a child, a tree with many growth rings, a cathedral, and a great modern city, epitome of nineteenth-century civilization. In its two years in print The Library of America *Whitman* has sold nearly 40,000 copies—significantly, most of these copies were bought not by librarians but by individuals, through bookstores. The publishers are now preparing an expanded edition, with a new section of fugitive and non-canonical poems.

1984 saw the publication of the late Paul Zweig's notable study, *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet*. In the spring of 1985 the University of Chicago Press plans to reprint Gay Wilson Allen's critical biography, *The Solitary Singer*. First published thirty years ago, on the centennial of *Leaves of Grass*, Professor Allen's work set the standard for subsequent Whitman scholarship. 1985 will also see the release, on P.B.S., of a one-hour Whitman documentary for television. Such events—new editions, new biographies, new works of criticism, new visions—in turn stimulate further discussions of Whitman's assured position in American and world literature. They are all evidences that today, *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's unkillable book, which he regarded as “a candidate for the future,” is more vigorous than ever.

In their zeal, some of Whitman's overheated disciples claimed that the city of Camden, where he spent the last twenty years of his life, would in time become the equal of the Kaaba at Mecca, the holiest place in the Muslim world. Obviously this hasn't come to pass, nor is it likely to. Number 328 Mickle Street has achieved a more seemly kind of prominence instead and draws thousands of visitors every year. Its survival as the last, or next to last, earthly home of America's greatest poet is additionally affirmed by this splendid new center.

