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11 WHITMAN'S AMERICA: A REVALUATION OF THE ^{QL}
CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS OF 'LEAVES OF GRASS' ^{QL}

⑨ Walt Whitman has long been considered highly unusual among nineteenth-century American writers in the frankness of his sexual themes, in his innovative use of free verse, and in the brash independence of his poetic voice. It is commonly believed that his stylistic and thematic innovations stood in opposition to a conventionally moralistic nineteenth-century society.¹

⑨ To assume that Whitman's sensibility was distanced from that of Victorian America, however, is to radically miscomprehend the cultural dimensions of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman saw his poem not as a rebellious gesture by an alienated genius but rather as an all-encompassing record of nineteenth-century America by a democratic poet. In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* he wrote that the American poet fails if "he does not flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides . . . if he be not himself the age transfigured."² He understood that his poem was the natural successor to previous American writings. Since the ground was, in his words, "ploughed and manured," he was free to produce a wholly American poem that expanded upon the experimental themes and devices of previous American writers.

In particular, he invited examination of his links with American popular culture. When Emerson in 1855 inquired about "the long foreground" of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman made it clear that his poetic development was intimately connected with the rise of the popular press. "What a progress popular reading and writing has made in fifty years!" Whitman exclaimed.³ And in a rhapsodic passage which must have made the philosopher Emerson raise his eyebrows, Whitman sang praise to all types of American popular writing: political newspapers, story newspapers, sporting papers, sensational novels, popular biographies, sentimental novels. Whitman declared that each popular genre, no matter how imperfect, formed the "nutriment" for high literature. At about the same time that he wrote this letter, he was scribbling enthusiastic private notes

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about popular culture, such as this: “[A]ll kinds of light reading, novels, newspapers, gossip, etc., serve as manure for the few *great productions* and are indispensable or perhaps are premises to something even better.”⁴

If we trace Whitman’s early career, we recognize that *Leaves of Grass* was itself one of those “great productions” that was fertilized by the so-called “manure” of popular literature. Scholars have been uncomfortable with the fact that before he produced his masterpiece Whitman had for nearly two decades been a hack writer. Most are puzzled by the apparent distance between his early writings and *Leaves of Grass*. The standard view is that Whitman began as a conventional writer of popular fiction and poetry and then experienced some dramatic change that made him a literary iconoclast. The truth is that from the start Whitman had tested out popular genres which themselves had taken on experimental and progressive qualities. The greatest poetic innovator of nineteenth-century America was nurtured by a popular culture that itself carried the seeds of a new literary rebelliousness.

The expansiveness of Whitman’s mature sensibility can be in large part attributed to the fact that in his early career he experimented ambitiously with virtually every form of popular writing, from the most piously conventional to the most grotesquely subversive. What is most intriguing about his early work is its variety. Whitman distinguished himself from his lesser contemporaries by trying out many *different* popular genres. When we compare him with other popular novelists and journalists of the day we immediately perceive his special openness to varied popular idioms. Most authors of the time confined themselves to single genres. A few authors separated themselves from the mass by trying on several guises — this flexibility paid stylistic dividends, for their best works possess a certain density, a certain fusion of voices that produces crude literariness. Still, these writers failed to produce truly complex literature because their experimentation did not go far enough. They opened their ears to *several* but not to *many* popular idioms, as did Whitman. Only Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne approached Whitman in the extensiveness of their experimentation with popular genres, but Whitman outdid even them, primarily because he was contributing to

a larger variety of popular periodicals than they.

What, then, were the specific popular currents that fed into *Leaves of Grass*? As I see it, the most important of these phenomena were what I call the new religious style; subversive reform rhetoric; a growing interest in sensational and erotic themes.

When I talk of the new religious style, I am pointing to a marked shift in the rhetoric used by popular American preachers and religious writers. Whitman once declared that he could not “have written a word of the *Leaves* without its religious rootground” and that the “one deep purpose” that underlay all others in writing the poem was “the Religious purpose.”⁵ The religious moments in Whitman’s writings show that he was keenly aware of the stylistic shift that was going on around him. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, American sermon style, which in Puritan times had been characterized by restraint and theological rigor, came to be dominated by entertaining pulpit illustrations, stories, and even humor. The new sermon style was particularly lively among the fiery urban evangelists of Whitman’s New York. During the 1830s and 40s, the evangelical denominations had to compete against each other, against the rising popular press, and against popular entertainments like stage melodramas and Barnum’s Museum for the attention of a working-class population increasingly made up of rowdies and roughs. The same boisterous firemen and streetcar drivers that Whitman rubbed shoulders with at the Old Bowery Theater were also frequenters of religious revivals. They hollered at the entertaining sermons of revivalists with the same frenzy that they hurled fruit at actors they didn’t like at the Old Bowery. Whitman recalled that in his young manhood the most important of “our amusements” were “the churches, especially the Methodist ones, with their frequent ‘revivals,’ ” which he said were attended by young fellows “with demure faces but always on the watch for devilry.”⁶

For Whitman, the new sermon style was a schoolroom in daringly secular reapplications of religious imagery. Whitman developed a lifelong interest in the sermons of popular preachers that were leaders in the stylistic revolution, including Father Taylor, Elias Hicks, Henry Ward Beecher, John W. Maffitt, and T. DeWitt Talmage.

At the same time that he was witnessing the new religious style in the popular pulpit, Whitman was experimenting with this style in several early poems and stories. His early experimentations in his early works are distinguished by a special boldness and freedom with sacrosanct religious topics. For instance, his visionary tales "The Love of Eris" and "The Angel of Tears" give unusually graphic, detailed views of angels and heaven. Likewise, in his Biblical story "Shirval: A Tale of Jerusalem" he goes beyond previous Biblical fictionists to give a daringly humanized picture of the man Jesus.

Whitman's appreciation of the new religious style and his early exercises in this style prepared him directly for the completely liberated, experiential use of religious imagery throughout *Leaves of Grass*, in which the imaginative fusion of the divine and the earthy produce combinations that have startling energy. If popular preachers and writers had treated the divine with an offhand familiarity, Whitman outdid them all in *Leaves of Grass* by calling God "The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine."⁷ If they had ushered warm human emotion into religious discourse, he took the further step of welding together sacred Biblical imagery and common human beings, as in the famous passage describing "the mechanic's wife with her babe at her nipple interceding for every person born." If the popular writers had filled their works with homely nature imagery, Whitman took such imagery to new shocking extremes, calling his own armpit odor "finer than any prayer" and a mouse "miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels." In a more general sense, Whitman's prophetic poetic voice, his stately Biblical cadences, his free intermixture of divine and secular images establish *Leaves of Grass* (which he once called "the new evangel-poem") a kind of sermon — a sermon, that is, of the distinctly experimental variety of nineteenth-century America.

While the new religious style provided Whitman with a body of refreshing, affirmative imagery, the second important popular phenomenon — the reform impulse — contributed to both the affirmative and the subversive elements of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman exclaimed to Horace Traubel: "There is an embarrassment of riches in reform."⁸ And he once wrote in his notebook: "*My final aim*: to concentrate around me the leaders of all reforms."⁹ Whitman's debt

to America's reform culture was profound indeed. During the 1840s, Whitman associated with many of the most dedicated reformers in New York. At the same time, Whitman himself became a well known reform writer. His most famous reform work was the temperance novel *Franklin Evans*; but he also wrote many stories and essays endorsing other popular reforms, including antislavery, labor reform, anti-prostitution, and anti-capital punishment.

Critics have had difficulty explaining how Whitman could have been so prudish as to write fiction denouncing alcohol and prostitution and then become so liberated as to openly defend sensual pleasures and warmly embrace prostitutes in *Leaves of Grass*. The most common critical strategy is either to ignore Whitman's early reform writing or to snicker at it. One critic dismisses *Franklin Evans* as a "comically awful temperance novel" that shows the immature Whitman adopting a popular genre produced by a prudish reform culture.¹⁰ The modern editor of Whitman's fiction and early poetry states flatly: "It is almost incredible that the man who wrote *Leaves of Grass* also wrote *Franklin Evans*."¹¹

Such dismissive comments obscure a major source of Whitman's thematic breadth and stylistic zest. What has not been recognized is that moral reform literature offered a wealth of imagery to Whitman precisely because, in its most imaginative forms, it was immoral and ambiguous. A complex body of reform literature sprang up during this period, produced first by evangelicals of the Southern frontier and then by working-class radicals and popular authors of the great North Atlantic cities. A wild subversiveness surged volcanically from below and created an electrically charged atmosphere that helped produce, among other things, Whitman's brash poetic voice. The immoral or dark reformers, as I call them, used the rhetoric of evangelical Protestantism as a protective shield for highly unconventional explorations of tabooed psychological and spiritual areas. These reformers described vice in such vivid detail that their writings left reform altogether behind and instead explored dark forces of the human psyche. These reformers proclaimed they were wallowing in foul moral sewers only to scour them clean; but their seamy writings prove they were more powerfully drawn to wallowing than to cleaning.

In his apprentice period Whitman immersed himself in the rhetoric of immoral reform. He recalled to Traubel that he loved to go hear the really *rabid* reform speakers, red-hot abolitionists like John P. Hale and Cassius Clay or terrifying dark-temperance orators like John B. Gough. In his own reform writing, Whitman exaggerated the vituperative spirit and the sensational imagery of the dark reformers. *Franklin Evans* is hardly a prudish work. It is a searing record of the horrific wages of vice, a repository for nearly all the grim images of the dark-temperance literature of the day. Whitman's later reform writings, such as his poems "Resurgemus" and "Dough-Face Song" and his prose tract "The Eighteenth Presidency," show the dark-reform style leading to a truly rebellious literary stance. In these works, Whitman adventurously plays with energetic, caustic reform imagery while soaring above narrow reform programs. Given the crucial importance of immoral reform to Whitman, it is understandable that his earliest known jottings in free verse (in his notebook for 1847) are highly paradoxical political and moral statements. He begins: "I am the poet of slaves, and of the masters of slaves./ . . . I am the poet of sin,/ For I do not believe in sin."¹² Having been inundated for years in ambiguous immoral reform rhetoric, he had learned to fly beyond slavery or antislavery, beyond sin or reform of sin to broader moral regions. By the time he wrote *Leaves of Grass* he had gained a moral expansiveness that allowed him to toss about sin and virtue with blithe abandonment:

I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also.

What is this blurt about virtue and about vice?

Evil propels me and reform of evil impels me, I stand indifferent[.]¹³

As a dark reformer early in his career, Whitman had learned to *manipulate* reform imagery to struggle free of conventional moral categories; he therefore became the expansive poet who stood indifferent above all moral distinctions or partial reforms.

The last popular phenomenon that had a major influence on Whitman was sensational literature, an umbrella term I assign to various kinds of popular novels with wild, racy themes. In a magazine

article of the mid-1850s, Whitman wrote that such literature was "a power in the land, not without great significance in its own way, and very deserving of more careful consideration than has hitherto been accorded it."¹⁴ This statement still holds true, since sensational literature has been almost totally ignored. In fact, it is commonly believed that American popular culture was dominated by sentimental-domestic works like Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter*. I have discovered that the proportion of sensational volumes published in America actually rose dramatically throughout the antebellum period and in fact constituted more than half of all volumes published here in the two decades before the appearance of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman recognized the importance of sensational literature. In his 1855 letter to Emerson he said that he was influenced by popular "strong-flavored romances" and the "low-priced, flaring tales," all of which he called "prophetic."¹⁵ Indeed, the largest proportion of his own early fiction and poetry falls into the sensational category.

One kind of sensational literature — what I call Romantic Adventure — featured frenzied action, wild settings, obsessed characters, and criminal or adventurous activity. Even more certainly than dark reform, Romantic Adventure abrogated conventional moral categories and permitted exploration of the outlawed and the irrational. Another kind of sensational writing — what I call the city-mysteries novel — explored the dark "mysteries" of American cities from an egalitarian perspective, attacking the wealthy as corrupt and defending the lower classes. In their portraits of upper-class depravity, the city novelists often became very explicit and prurient in the treatment of sexual themes. In their defenses of the poor, they gave voice to the fiery republicanism of the streets that fed directly into Whitman's poetic persona.

Whitman not only read the sensational literature of others but regularly tried his hand at such writing. Such early lurid Whitman tales as "The Half-Breed: A Tale of the Western Frontier" and "Richard Parker's Widow" typify the Romantic Adventure genre in their interest in juicy themes like necrophilia, bloody murder, deformity, madness, and frontier escapades. Many of Whitman's accounts of New York life in the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* are

characteristic of the city-mysteries mode. Both kinds of sensational literature were emotionally purgative and morally liberating for Whitman. Several passages in *Leaves of Grass* actually read like poeticized adventure novels: one thinks of Section 34, which is a gory rendering of the fall of the Alamo, or the subsequent section in which Whitman recounts exciting sea yarns. By exploring the outlawed and the irrational in his early Romantic Adventure pieces, Whitman had prepared for his defiantly wicked stance throughout *Leaves of Grass*. Romantic Adventure novelists had commonly made heroes out of criminals and social pariahs; Whitman in his poem went beyond them by proclaiming he felt at home with murderers, whores, and deformed people.

Even more important to Whitman's development than Romantic Adventure was the second kind of sensational literature: city-mysteries fiction. Two aspects of such fiction that I want to mention now are the character of the "b'hoy" and the frank eroticism of such fiction. It is commonly thought that Whitman's poetic pose as "Walt Whitman, one of the roughs" was unusual in literature of the day. The fact is that this persona was the natural culmination of a popular interest in the figure of the "b'hoy," the jauntily wicked but smart and likable lower-middle-class young man of the New York streets. Such a figure had actually emerged in the boisterous working-class culture of the 1840s; soon the "b'hoy" achieved a kind of mythic status by appearing in many popular novels and stage plays. Whitman was very much aware of this popular stereotype. He uses the word "b'hoy" to describe people at least three times in his published writings, and his best friends in the 1840s were the firemen, cab drivers, and ferry men who made up the "b'hoy" population. In popular literature the "b'hoy" was a pugnacious but likable hero who embodied both the frustrations and the rebelliousness of the urban working-class in time of widespread unemployment and fierce gang warfare. When Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* poeticized himself as swaggerer, swearer, boaster, and loafer he was capturing many of the qualities that had made the b'hoy such a popular literary figure.

The final popular phenomenon — frank treatment of sex — will seem strange to those who think of Victorian America as a laughably proper, puritanical culture. A significant number of sensational

novels were incredibly explicit in their treatment of sex. Even by today's standards, many of these novels seem daring, because they often combine gory violence with accounts of eroticism in all its manifestations: adultery, incest, miscegenation, group sex, and sadomasochism are featured in these remarkable novels. The sensational novelists pretended to be righteously exposing the secret amours of depraved upper-class characters; but in fact they were providing titillation and sexual fantasy for an American public increasingly hungry for erotic literature. Whitman was disturbed by the popularity of such literature. He wrote in his notebook: "In the plentiful feast of romance presented to us, all the novels, all the poems really dish up only one figure, various forms of only one plot, namely, a sickly, scrofulous, crude, amorousness."¹⁶ Elsewhere he wrote that the wide circulation of "erotic stories and talk, dwelling on the lusty and copulative" made him wish to deal poetically with sex in a way that was "normal and unperverted."¹⁷

Indeed, one of Whitman's principal achievements in *Leaves of Grass* was to continue the explicit treatment of sex but to restore sex to the purer realm of procreation, natural affection, comradeship, and so forth. This is why he always thought of himself as a very "moral" poet trying to cleanse a dirty, immoral society. He complained in *Democratic Vistas* of the "absence . . . of moral conscientious fibre all through American society."¹⁸ Throughout *Leaves of Grass* he tries to recover sexuality from the mire of perversity and place it on a higher level. As he writes in the poem: "Through me forbidden voices./ . . . Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured."¹⁹

Stylistically, Whitman can be placed in a line of subversive American writers who had long tried to break conventional literary rules. As early as 1825 (three decades before the appearance of *Leaves of Grass*) the sensational writer John Neal had written: "A great revolution is at hand. . . . Poetry will disencumber itself of rhyme and measure; and talk in prose — with a sort of rhythm, I admit."²⁰ Just as Neal called for an abolishment of what he called "the poetry of form, . . . of rhyme, measure, and cadence," so several popular sensationalists of the 1840s lambasted sentimental rhymed verse, which they associated with the artificiality and constrictions of an

effete literary establishment. Whitman's free-verse experiments, his rapid time-space shifts, and his catalogs all had precedent in what I call the American Subversive Style, characterized by odd juxtapositions and deliberate flaunting of literary rules.

Whitman, therefore, did not rebel against a staid, narrow American culture: instead, he was shaped by a culture whose many voices, from the religious to the erotic, he had carefully listened to throughout his early career. Despite his deep affinities with other American writers, it must be noted that he did not just *adopt* popular themes and devices; he determinedly *transformed* them with the conscious aim of giving them a resonance and control they lacked in their crude native state. His private writings show that actually he hated the directionlessness of much popular writing and especially despised the excessive sensationalism of the mass press. In his poetry he tried to repair these deficiencies. He stressed that America desperately needed a new kind of literature, one that would fully absorb the other kinds but introduce an emotional genuineness, a suggestiveness, a firm artistry they lacked. He believed that the poet's role was to emphasize directness in response to universal hypocrisy, interconnectedness in response to social fragmentation, and hearty individualism in response to the leveling effects of mass literature. Unlike the popular sensationalists, he did not revel in lurid imaginings of secret corruption among the rich. He wanted to supplant the seamy social exposé with a new, sane poetry that absorbed all the rage of the popular writers but also affirmed unity with nature, with death, with past and future generations. Popular subversive rhetoric was extremely important to him for clearing the air, for undercutting stale institutions. But he saw that, when carried too far, such rhetoric only worsened the amorality he saw in American society. In poetry he wished to absorb popular images but at the same time return to what he called the "primal sanities" of nature. The poet's job was one of cleansing and fusion; as he put it in "Song of the Exposition," it is "Not to repel or destroy so much as accept, fuse, rehabilitate."²¹

In several of his best poems we see him incorporating the sensationalists' images but turning freshly to universals such as nature, death, sleep, time, and so forth. Many of his poems are

governed by this conscious strategy of taking disturbing, often shocking aspects of modern life and determinedly converting them into affirmations of the human spirit and the order of nature. Even in his boldest moments he hoped to transfigure popular sensationalism. To the quirky American Subversive Style he brought new structural unity through his carefully regulated repetitions and his balanced rhythms. To the treatment of erotic themes, he overcame the prurience and perversity of what he called "the love plot" of popular novels and introduced a genuine sexuality linked with hearty comradeship and love of nature. Above all he wished to present sex as a natural, unifying human impulse rather than the perverse, divisive contest it had become in the hands of the sensationalists.

In light of his heavy use of popular modes and stereotypes, it is understandable that he expected *Leaves of Grass* to enjoy a lively sale. He concluded the 1855 preface by announcing, "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."²⁶ The next year he predicted to Emerson that within a short time his poem would be selling an average of 20,000 copies a year. What he did not understand was that he had imported into his poem *too many* popular voices to achieve great popularity. The best-selling works of his period were those which featured a small number of Conventional or Subversive themes, and which kept the realms separate and distinct. *Leaves of Grass* avoids such simple oppositions. By fusing disparate popular images and adding reconstructive devices of his own, Whitman alienated both readers of Conventional literature and sensation-lovers who demanded the merely prurient and shocking. Whitman was in the painful position of having written a masterpiece of broad cultural representativeness that nevertheless was rejected by the very culture that had produced it. Still, if he failed to win the mass readership of his day, he insured his enduring fame by cultivating new literary fruit on grounds that had been well manured by others, especially those feisty sensationalists he knew so well.

NOTES

¹ Gay Wilson Allen, for example, generalized that American literature in Whitman's day was "prudish and inhibited" (*The Solitary Singer. A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* [New York: New York University Press, 1967], p. 210). Similarly, Paul Zweig argues that "Victorian America was relentlessly moralistic — a tendency that included a conventional insistence on the moral usefulness of art." In this atmosphere of sentimental optimism, Zweig writes, the unconventional Whitman "didn't find his Americanness; he created it all on his own" (*Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet* [New York: Basic Books, 1984], pp. 12, 139). More recently, David Cavitch has claimed that Whitman "lived in a parochial American culture" that left him "[u]nprovided with any useful cultural attitude toward his passionate inner experience," forcing him to transcribe his own fantasies and neuroses in intensely private poetry (*My Soul and I: The Inner Life of Walt Whitman* [Boston: Beacon, 1985], pp. 29, 30).

² Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), p. 23.

³ *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 1329.

⁴ W. Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*. ed. Richard Maurice Bucke (Ontario: A. Talbot & Co., n.d.), p. 130.

⁵ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: Mitchell Kennedy, 1915), I: 10; and W. Whitman, *Prose Works, 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1964), II: 551, 549.

⁶ *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, ed. Emory Holloway (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1972), II, 255.

⁷ W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 83. The subsequent quotations in this paragraph are on pp. 75, 59, 51.

⁸ *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, V: 509.

⁹ *Walt Whitman's Workshop: A Collection of Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Clifton Joseph Furness (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), p. 62.

¹⁰ P. Zweig, *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet*, p. 117.

¹¹ Thomas L. Brasher, ed., *Walt Whitman, The Early Poems and the Fiction*, (New York: New York University Press, 1963), p. 125.

¹² *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, II: 69.

¹³ *Leaves of Grass. Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, p. 50.

¹⁴ *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, II: 21.

¹⁵ W. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 1329.

¹⁶ W. Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, p. 146.

¹⁷ *Walt Whitman's Workshop*, p. 233.

¹⁸ W. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 939.

¹⁹ W. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 50.

²⁰ John Neal, *Randolph, A Novel* (New York, 1823), II: 190.

²¹ W. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 341.

²² W. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 26.



Peter Fortunato

VASILI

At the waterfront, boats tied up, nets
dripping across decks, the fishermen
have cached it all — market in the alley
smells of fresh money — and at the cafe,
without a shave, in shoes weeping saltwater
Vasili gives his lecture: Eye cocked on the grey sky
gyrating at the mast tops: nine moments before dawn.

In his face, flying fish are leaping,
the sun screams silently, the nights are deprived
of sleep, his patron saint treks mountains
and drinks sweetwater from a chapel cistern,
eyes bluer than you'd think a Greek's would be.
Coffee cup empty, refilled, a small table of men
in stained jackets, one speaking no Greek
you understand, insomniac with roosters —
"That was the woman could save us!"