

A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman

*DAVID S. REYNOLDS,
Editor*

Oxford University Press

A HISTORICAL GUIDE TO
Walt Whitman

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to Walt Whitman



EDITED BY
DAVID S. REYNOLDS

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Abbreviations

- BDE* Thomas L. Brasher. *Whitman as Editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970.
- CH* Walt Whitman, *the Critical Heritage*. Ed. Milton Hindus. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971.
- DN* Whitman. *Daybooks and Notebooks*. Ed. William H. White. 3 vols. New York: New York University Press, 1978.
- GF* *The Gathering of the Forces*. Ed. Cleveland Rodgers and John Black. 2 vols. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920.
- ISit* Whitman. *I Sit and Look Out: Editorials from the Brooklyn Daily Times*. Ed. Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwartz. New York: AMS Press, 1966.
- LGC* Whitman. *Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader's Edition*. Ed. Harold Blodgett and Sculley Bradley. New York: New York University Press, 1965.
- NUPM* Whitman. *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*. Ed. Edward F. Grier. 6 vols. New York: New York University Press, 1984.
- NYA* *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora*. Ed. Joseph J. Rubin and Charles H. Brown. State College, Penn.: Bald Eagle Press, 1950.
- NYD* Whitman. *New York Dissected*. Ed. Emory Holloway and Ralph Adimari. New York: Rufus Rockwell Wilson, 1936.
- PW* Whitman. *Prose Works, 1892*. Ed. Floyd Stovall. 2 vols. New


- York: New York University Press. Vol. I: *Specimen Days* (1963); Vol. II: *Collect and Other Prose* (1964).
- TC Whitman. *The Correspondence*. Ed. Edwin Haviland Miller. 5 vols. New York: New York University Press. Vol. I: 1842–67 (1961); Vol. II: 1868–75 (1964); Vol. III: 1876–85 (1964); Vol. IV: 1886–89 (1969); Vol. V: 1890–92 (1969).
- UPP *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*. Ed. Emory Holloway. 2 vols. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1972.
- WCP Whitman. *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*. Ed. Justin Kaplan. New York: Library of America, 1982.
- WEP Whitman. *The Early Poems and the Fiction*. Ed. Thomas L. Brasher. New York: New York University Press, 1963.
- WWC Horace Traubel. *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. 7 vols. Vol. I (1905; rpt., New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961); Vol. II (1907; rpt., New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961); Vol. III (1912; rpt., New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961); Vol. IV (1953; rpt., Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959); Vol. V (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964); Vol. VI (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982); Vol. VII (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992); Vol. VIII (Oregon House, Cal.: W. L. Bentley, 1996); Vol. IX (Oregon House, Cal.: W. L. Bentley, 1996).

A HISTORICAL GUIDE TO
Walt Whitman

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Introduction

David S. Reynolds



One of America's most beloved and influential writers, Walt Whitman (1819–1892) brought a radical democratic inclusiveness to literature, transforming the diverse, sometimes pedestrian images of his culture into soaring, fresh poetry through his exuberant personality. He opened the way for modern writers by experimenting with innovative social and sexual themes and by replacing rhyme and meter with a free-flowing, prose-like poetic form that followed the natural rhythms of voice and feeling.

Few books of poetry have had so controversial a history as Whitman's brash, erotically charged *Leaves of Grass*. When the volume's first edition appeared in 1855, some prudish reviewers branded it as obscene and egotistical. "A mass of stupid filth" was the verdict of the fastidious critic Rufus Griswold.¹ The *Boston Intelligencer* similarly labeled it "a mass of bombast, egotism, vulgarity, and nonsense."² Even the discerning Henry David Thoreau, while generally enthusiastic about Whitman, wrote of *Leaves of Grass*, "It is as if the beasts spoke."³

In the face of such attacks, Whitman took pains to minimize explicit sexual images in later poems he wrote for his ever-expanding volume, six editions of which were published in his lifetime. His increasing attention to themes of religion, patriotism, and technological progress, coupled with his selfless service

as a volunteer nurse in the Civil War hospitals, resulted in his being widely venerated as America's "Good Gray Poet." Still, attacks continued to come from some quarters. In 1882, Boston publisher James R. Osgood was forced to stop printing the book's sixth edition when the city's district attorney, Oliver Stevens, ruled that *Leaves of Grass* violated "the Public Statutes concerning obscene literature"; this episode gave rise to the phrase "banned in Boston."⁴

It was Whitman's frankness about heterosexual eroticism that most raised eyebrows in the nineteenth century. That was the era when in polite circles the repression of sex could be taken to absurd extremes: piano legs were frequently covered in frilly stockings, undergarments were called "inexpressibles," and nude sculptures in museums were sometimes decorously draped in gauze. It is small wonder that some readers were shocked by a poet who, in his opening poem, announced his urge to go "undisguised and naked" in the woods, who described a lonely woman yearning to caress twenty-eight young men swimming nude in a nearby stream, and who evoked sexual intercourse, as in the lines "Thruster holding me tight and that I hold tight! / We hurt each other as the bridegroom and the bride hurt each other."⁵

Most nineteenth-century reviewers did not take special note of what today seem to be the homosexual undercurrents of *Leaves of Grass*. Because Whitman's treatment of male comradeship was in keeping with then-current mores of same-sex love (the term "homosexuality" was not used in English until 1892, the year the poet died), his "Calamus" poems, which to many modern readers seem clearly homoerotic, elicited far fewer outcries than his poems of heterosexual intimacy, especially "A Woman Waits for Me" and "To a Common Prostitute." During the Boston banning, the latter two poems were named as particularly offensive. Amazingly, even the tame poem "A Dalliance of the Eagles," about the mating of a male bird and a female bird in midair, came under the Boston ban, as did some twenty-two scattered references to heterosexual passion in other poems. The fact that the innocent "Dalliance" was targeted while all but one of the forty-five "Calamus" poems were allowed to stand tells much about the era's moral tastes, which were ridiculously squeamish about heterosexual love but still per-

missive of same-sex affection, which was not generally associated with sexual passion. Similarly, two Whitman anthologies of the period, Ernest Rhys's *Leaves of Grass: The Poems of Walt Whitman* (1886) and Arthur Stedman's 1892 collection of Whitman's *Selected Poems*, omitted many of the heteroerotic images while retaining the homoerotic ones, which were deemed conventional enough to be included in these scrubbed, polite volumes designed for the Victorian parlor.

The issue of the contemporary response to Whitman's sexual images points up a larger topic that is the basis of the current volume: Whitman cannot be adequately understood unless he is placed fully in his unique historical moment. To be sure, his poetry, like all great literature, transcends its era and speaks eloquently to later generations. But the fact that it still moves us does not mean that we can recklessly impose today's ideas or values on it. However enlightened our ideas on topics like sex, class, or race may be, we are doing a disservice to Whitman if we ignore his own cultural contexts and bend his writings to fit our own priorities. "In estimating my volumes," he wrote, "the world's current times, and deeds, and their spirit, must first be profoundly estimated."⁶ The poet fails, he wrote, "if he does not flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides [. . .] if he be not himself the age transfigured."⁷

Whitman's writings were indeed "the age transfigured," reflecting virtually all aspects of nineteenth-century life. His poetry emerged in the 1850s, when the nation was on the verge of unraveling due to the quarrel over slavery that led to the Civil War. Whitman, a former political hack who had edited Brooklyn's leading Democratic newspaper and had written conventional poetry and fiction, was startled out of his complacency by the specter of impending disunion. No longer a party loyalist, he had come to believe that the nation was threatened on all sides by corruption and moral flabbiness. Of President Franklin Pierce, the soft-spined chief executive who leaned to the South, Whitman wrote, "The President eats dirt and excrement for his daily meals, likes it, and tries to force it on The States."⁸ Horrified by escalating tensions between the North and the South in the wake of the infamous Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and the proslavery

Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, he wrote, "We need satisfiers, joiners, lovers. These heated, torn, distracted ages are to be compacted and made whole."⁹ The nation's merits and demerits, as he called them, must be transformed in the crucible of poetry.

Describing the poet's all-unifying role, he announced, "One part does not counteract another part, he is the joiner, he sees how they join."¹⁰ For Whitman, the times demanded a poet who could survey the entire cultural landscape and give expression to the full range of voices and images America had to offer.

Among these cultural voices were strident ones of anger and protest. For a decade before the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared, reformers of various stripes had been agitating for radical social change. Antislavery minister Henry Ward Beecher declared in 1851, "Agitation? What have we got to work with but agitation? Agitation is *the* thing in these days for any good."¹¹ Abolitionist lecturer Wendell Phillips asserted, "Republics exist only on the tenure of being constantly agitated," a sentiment echoed by his colleague Joshua Giddings, who said, "Agitation is the great and mighty instrument for carrying forward reforms."¹² And Whitman's favorite politician, Free-Soil senator John P. Hale, told Congress, "I glory in the name of agitator. I wish the country could be agitated more vastly than it is."

Whitman thought that he, above all, was the one chosen to agitate the country. He declared, "I think agitation is the most important factor of all—the most deeply important. To stir, to question, to suspect, to examine, to denounce!"¹³ In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, he announced that the poet is best equipped to "make every word he speaks draw blood . . . he never stagnates."¹⁴ Key lines in his poems echo this zestful tone: "I am he who walks the states with a barb'd tongue, questioning every one I meet"; and "Let others praise eminent men and hold up peace, I hold up agitation and conflict."¹⁵ He never gave up the spirit of agitation he shared with antebellum reformers. "As circulation is to the air, so is agitation and a plentiful degree of speculative license to political and moral sanity," he wrote in his 1871 prose essay *Democratic Vistas*. "Viva, the attack—the perennial assault!"¹⁶

Agitation for Whitman did not mean joining a radical reform

group intent on revolutionizing the social order. To the contrary, he viewed reformers as potentially dangerous disrupters of society. During the slavery crisis, he berated both abolitionists and proslavery southern fire-eaters, both of whom were calling for the immediate separation of the North and the South. As a newspaper editor in the 1840s, he fumed, "Despising and condemning the dangerous and fanatical intensity of 'Abolitionism'—as impracticable as it is wild—the *Brooklyn Eagle* as much condemns the other extreme from that."¹⁷ Although he believed in the social and political advancement of women, he took no part in the many women's rights conventions that succeeded the historic one in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Likewise, even though his liberated attitude toward sex had much in common with that of the free-love advocates of his day, he had little tolerance for the free-love movement. Although he featured working-class types in his poetry, he did not accept working-class radical movements such as Fourierist socialism or, later on, communism and anarchism. When his left-leaning aficionado Horace Traubel hounded him on his political stance, he advised, "Be radical, be radical, be radical—be not too damned radical."¹⁸

While advocating agitation, therefore, Whitman took care to avoid excessive radicalism. For example, Whitman, a devotee of the Union, could not identify with abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who, in disgust over slavery, burned the Constitution in public and thundered, "Accursed be the AMERICAN UNION, as a stupendous republican imposture!"¹⁹ Nor could he, an ardent advocate of the marriage institution, go along with the free-lovers, who wanted to abolish conventional marriage because they regarded it as legalized prostitution. For all his adventurousness, he had a definite conservative streak, an impulse to avoid extremes and steer a political middle course. It was perhaps for this reason that he shied away from homosexual activists, especially British writer John Addington Symonds, who pressed him to make a clear declaration of his homosexuality. In the early 1870s, Symonds began barraging Whitman with questions on the matter; Whitman later recalled that these questions aroused in him a "violently reactionary" response "strong and brutal for no, no, no."²⁰ When, in 1890, Symonds asked point-blank whether the

"Calamus" poems portrayed what was then called "sexual inversion," Whitman angrily insisted that such "morbid inferences" were "damnable" and "disavow'd by me."²¹

It could be, as some have claimed, that Whitman was telling the truth when he denied being an active homosexual. Information about the poet's sex life is slim: there is strong evidence that he had at least two fleeting affairs with women around the time of the Civil War, and he had a number of passionate (whether or not physical) relationships with young men. Most likely, though, his denial to Symonds was emblematic of his lifelong impulse to defuse any controversial topic that could prove deleterious to his personal or social peace. He witnessed enough disruption among his family members—his father's financial struggles, the pathetic retardation of his brother Eddy, the psychotic episodes of his sister Hannah, the confirmed insanity of his brother Jesse, whom Walt had to commit to the Brooklyn Lunatic Asylum—to make him want, at all costs, to avoid further disorder in his private life. That's why, when he was in the throes of his stormy relationship with Washington streetcar conductor Peter Doyle, he warned himself to "depress . . . this diseased, feverish, disproportionate adhesiveness" and cultivate "a superb calm character."²² Hence also his idealized self-portrait in the 1855 preface; as he described himself "the equable man" who could handle all things "grotesque or eccentric."²³

It is significant that this poetic balancing act began in 1847, the year President James Polk intensified the war against Mexico in an effort to take over hundreds of millions of acres of land in what is now the American West. For antislavery northerners like Whitman, the Mexican War was part of an infamous plot by the South to capture new land where slavery might be planted. This specter of the westward expansion of slavery induced Henry David Thoreau to refuse to pay his local poll tax, leading to the one-night incarceration in the Concord jail immortalized in his protest essay "Civil Disobedience." Whitman, a Free-Soiler who had editorially opposed slavery extension in the *Eagle*, was prepared neither to go to jail for his beliefs nor to demand immediate disunion, as the Garrisonians were doing. Instead, his first instinct was to write poetry in which the two sides of the slavery

divide were held in friendly equilibrium. In his notebook, he scribbled the first known lines of the kind of free-flowing, prose-like verse that would become his stylistic signature.

I am the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves,[. . .]
 I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters
 And I will stand between the masters and the slaves,
 Entering into both so that both shall understand me alike.²⁴

Whitman here invents a poetic "I" who can comfortably mediate between the political antagonists whose opposing claims threaten to divide the nation. He announces himself simultaneously as the poet of "slaves" and of "the masters of slaves," one who is prepared to "go with" both "equally." He is able to "stand between" and "enter into" both. Emerging directly out of the slavery crisis, Whitman's poetic persona was constructed as an absorptive device that could imaginatively defuse rancorous sectional quarrels, just as in his private life Whitman cultivated a "superb calm character" to meliorate personal upheavals.

During the early 1850s, his alarm over rising national tensions intensified, and the absorptive, equalizing power of his "I" grew exponentially. For him, the poet was no marginal artist distanced from the social events of the day but rather a vital social agent necessary for national healing and reconciliation. He once referred to his "main life work" as the "*great construction of the new Bible*."²⁵ Indeed, he had messianic visions of changing the world through inspired poetry whose pulsating rhythms, as scholars have shown, owed much to the King James version of the Bible. "This is what you shall do," he instructed in the 1855 preface, ". . . read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life."²⁶ Of all nations, he emphasized, the United States "most need poets." Since political leaders were failing miserably to hold the nation together, poets alone held the key to social cohesion. "The Presidents," he announced, "shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall." The poet, he explained, "is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land . . . he supplies what wants supplying and checks what wants checking."

What he supplied in *Leaves of Grass* was a profoundly democratic vision in which all barriers—sectional, racial, religious, spatial, and sexual—were challenged in unprecedented ways. Theoretically, American democracy had itself abolished social barriers. By the 1850s, however, it had become painfully clear that such barriers were on the verge of separating the nation. Whitman's poetic persona affirmed complete equality. At a time when the North and the South were virtually at each other's throats, Whitman's "I" proclaimed himself, "A southerner soon as a northerner, / . . . At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine or the Texan ranch."²⁷ In an era when racial conflict was exacerbated by the slavery debate and by surging immigration, he painted sympathetic portraits of Native Americans, recently arrived Europeans, and African Americans—even to the extent of identifying himself with a fugitive slave: "I am the hounded slave . . . I wince at the bite of dogs, / Hell and despair are upon me." During a period when class divisions were prompting American socialists to establish scores of classless communities throughout the country, he forged a poetic utopia in which the rich and the poor, the powerful and the marginal co-existed in diversified harmony. This thoroughly democratic "I" was, in the words of "Song of Myself":

Of every hue and trade and rank, of every caste and religion,
 Not merely of the New World but of Africa Europe or Asia . . .
 a wandering savage,
 A farmer, mechanic, or artist . . . a gentleman, sailor, lover or
 quaker,
 A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer physician or priest.

Whitman hoped that America would learn from his example of total democracy. He ended the 1855 preface by announcing confidently, "The proof of the poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."²⁸ Such absorption, however, was long in coming. True, perceptive readers such as Emerson, Swinburne, and Rossetti recognized the wondrous power of Whitman's verse. "I greet you at the beginning of a great career," Emerson wrote him in a letter, saying his poetry

"has the best merits, namely of fortifying and encouraging."²⁹ But *Leaves of Grass*, which had attempted to abolish all narrowness of vision, immediately became subject to narrow interpretations. A number of critics fixed on its sexual images, giving rise to a long debate between those who branded Whitman as obscene and those who insisted that he treated sex candidly and purely. Leading the defense was the fiery reformer William Douglas O'Connor, who brilliantly nicknamed Whitman the "Good Gray Poet," a sobriquet that did much to defuse opponents and emphasize the poet's benign, avuncular qualities.

But the "Good Gray" image itself proved confining, as Whitman increasingly turned away from daringly experimental themes and toward more conventional ones. The Civil War, he thought, accomplished for the nation what he had hoped his poetry would by blowing away many social ills and bringing to power Abraham Lincoln, the homespun "captain" who possessed many of the egalitarian qualities Whitman had assigned to his poetic "I." In Lincoln's life—and especially in his tragic death—America was rescued, Whitman thought, because at last it had a martyred authority figure it could worship without shame. Whitman devoted much of the last three decades of his life to eulogizing Lincoln and the war, repeatedly giving his lecture "The Death of Abraham Lincoln" and reading "O Captain! My Captain" before reverent audiences.

Confused by the complex social realities of Reconstruction, Whitman retreated to a moderately conservative stance on issues such as race and class. Radical activists—free-lovers, feminists, communists, religious iconoclasts—continued to flock to him, using progressive passages from his early poems to promote their individual causes. But he maintained a genial distance from their programs, insisting that his work could be understood only in its relation to the totality of American culture.

It has not been much easier for modern readers to see the whole Whitman than it was for his contemporaries. Just after his death, his friends and followers—later dismissed as the "hot little prophets"—deified him in hagiographic books and articles. Then came the Freudian revisionists, from Jean Catel through Edwin Haviland Miller and David Cavitch, who portrayed him as a deeply conflicted

man driven by neuroses ranging from father hatred to repressed homosexuality. Individual schools of critics have, predictably, claimed Whitman as their own. For the New Critics, Whitman is the master of language experimentation. For deconstructionists, he is the ever-elusive poet whose meanings inevitably sink into an abyss of indeterminacy. For feminists, his occasionally conservative statements about women have counted less than his ringing endorsements of the equality of the sexes. For queer theorists, almost everything in his verse can be traced to his sexual orientation.

How would Whitman have viewed the various interpretations? Individually, he probably would have said, each is narrow and reductive; taken together, they begin to approach the wholeness of his poetry. "No one can know *Leaves of Grass*," he declared, "who judges it piecemeal."³⁰ The problem with most critics, he stressed, was that they "do not take the trouble to examine what they started out to criticize—to judge a man from his own standpoint, to even find out what that standpoint is."

The current volume attempts to judge Whitman from his own standpoint by evaluating his life and work in the context of his times. My capsule biography demonstrates the close affinity between the poet's life and major currents in society and culture. Ed Folsom's essay demonstrates that Whitman's treatment of race reflected larger cultural phenomena, from the insurrectionary spirit of the 1850s to the complex circumstances of Reconstruction. Jerome Loving traces Whitman's ambivalent views on social class—sometimes radical, sometimes conservative—to opposing attitudes on the topic that circulated in antebellum America. M. Jimmie Killingsworth probes the homosexuality issue, evaluating some of Whitman's most confessional poems against the background of a society in which clear notions of sexual types had not yet evolved. Roberta K. Tarbell reveals the profound influences of art and artists on the poet's sensibility, and Kenneth Cmiel links *Leaves of Grass* to the theory and practice of American democracy.

By exploring a wide spectrum of historical dimensions in Whitman, this volume attempts to capture the spirit of the poet who declared, "I am large, I contain multitudes." Whitman would

surely endorse an effort to ground his poetry in a society whose invigorating diversity was the chief source of his all-encompassing vision.

NOTES

1. CH, 32.
2. CH, 61.
3. *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1974) 444.
4. Oliver Stevens to James R. Osgood, letter of March 1, 1882. Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress.
5. WCP, 27, 47.
6. WCP, 23.
7. WCP, 1310.
8. NUPM, I:96.
9. WCP, 10.
10. LGC, 344.
11. In Paxton Hibben, *Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait* (1927; rpt., New York: Press of the Readers Club, 1942), 187.
12. Phillips, *Speeches, Lectures, and Essays* (1884; rpt., New York: Negro University Press, 1968), 53; Giddings, quoted in Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 112. The statement by Hale quoted in the next sentence is also on 112.
13. WWC, V:529.
14. WCP, 9.
15. LGC, 342, 237.
16. PW, II:383, 386.
17. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 5, 1846.
18. WWC, I:223.
19. *Selections from the Writings and Speeches of William Lloyd Garrison* (New York: Negro University Press, 1968), 119.
20. WWC, I:77.
21. TC, V:71.
22. NUPM, II:887, 886.
23. WCP, 8.


24. *NUPM*, I:69.
25. *NUPM*, I:353.
26. *WCP*, II. The following quotations in this paragraph are on 8–9.
27. *WCP*, 42. The following quotations in this paragraph are on 65 and 43.
28. *WCP*, 26.
29. *LGC*, 729–30.
30. *WWC*, I:116. The next quotation in this paragraph is from *WWC*, IV:41.

Walt Whitman

1812–1892

A Brief Biography

David S. Reynolds



Walt Whitman emerged from a humble background to become one of America's most celebrated poets. The second of eight children of Walter and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, he was born on May 31, 1819, in the rural Long Island village of West Hills, about fifty miles east of Manhattan. Although his ancestors were not distinguished, he later placed great emphasis on his genealogy. In his poem "By Blue Ontario's Shore," he wrote, "Underneath all, Nativity, / I swear I will stand by my own nativity."¹

He made much of his dual ancestry—English on his father's side, Dutch on his mother's. He believed he got a "Hollandisk" firmness from his mother's ancestors and a certain obstinacy and willfulness from the "paternal English elements."² His paternal lineage reached back to Zechariah Whitman, who came to America from England in the 1660s and settled in Milford, Connecticut. Zechariah's son Joseph resettled across the sound in Huntington, Long Island, where he became a local official and a landholder. He acquired large tracts of land that became known as "Joseph Whitman's Great Hollow." His sons acquired even more land, and his grandson Nehemiah built what became the family homestead on a 500-acre farm in the West Hills area of Huntington. Nehemiah's wife, Phoebe (better known as Sarah),

chewed tobacco, swore freely, and fired commands at the slaves who tilled the land.

The large Whitman landholdings were slowly dissipated over the generations. The poet's father retained a sixty-acre portion of the Whitman land. A carpenter and sometime farmer, Walter Whitman, Sr, built a two-story house there around 1810 and six years later moved into it with his wife. According to some sources, he was a moody, taciturn man whose temperament was at least partly captured in the famous lines "The father, strong, self-sufficient, manly, mean, anger'd, unjust, / The blow, the quick loud word, the tight bargain, the crafty lure."³

Still, biographers who claim that the poet was locked in oedipal conflict with his father overstate the hostility of their relationship. His brother George would say, "His relations with his father were always friendly, always good."⁴ Most of Walt's recollections of his father were, in fact, affectionate. In old age, he told stories of his father's love for cattle and children. He recalled fondly the pride his father took in his house-building skills, which for the poet represented the bygone artisan work habits threatened by rising industrialism. Also, he inherited from his father freethinking and democratic sympathies.

His mother, Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, came from a Long Island Dutch family that had established a homestead in Woodbury, not far from the Whitman land. His maternal grandmother, Naomi (Amy), was a genial Quaker woman whose death in 1826 was one of the great sorrows of his youth. His grandfather, the florid, hearty Major Cornelius Van Velsor, raised horses that the young Walt sometimes rode on Saturdays. Often the major perched the boy beside him on his farm wagon as he made the long ride across poor roads to deliver produce in Brooklyn.

Walt's mother, though unlearned and sometimes querulous and hypochondriac, was a loving woman with a vivid imagination and a gift for storytelling. She faced difficult circumstances: her husband's uncertain moods, financial instability, and, apparently, some problematic children, two of whom (Jesse and Hannah) would develop emotional problems and one of whom (Edward) was retarded and possibly epileptic from birth. Still, four of her children—George, Mary, Jeff, and Walt himself—approached

normalcy. A good housekeeper and family peacemaker, she was often portrayed idealistically by the poet: "The mother at home quietly placing dishes on the supper-table, / The mother with mild words, clean her cap and gown, a wholesome odor falling off her person as she walks by."⁵

In May 1823, Walter Whitman took his pregnant wife and three young children from West Hills to seek his fortune in Brooklyn as a house carpenter. For a decade, he tried to take advantage of a real estate boom by building and selling small frame houses. Although he was a skilled carpenter, he did not have a good head for business, and he struggled financially. The Whitmans lived in no fewer than seven houses in Brooklyn in a decade. Of these houses, Walt would write, "We occupied them, one after the other, but they were mortgaged, and we lost them."⁶

A village of around 7,000 when the Whitmans moved there, Brooklyn was entering a period of rapid growth that by 1855, would make it the fourth-largest city in the nation. Walt Whitman spent twenty-eight years of his life there and often spoke of its influence on him. "I was bred in Brooklyn," he said later, "through many, many years, tasted its familiar life."⁷ Located between rapidly urbanizing Manhattan to the west and rural Long Island to the east, Brooklyn for Whitman was a middle ground between the two, with access to both. In the 1820s, it still had characteristics of a country town. Its dusty, unpaved streets turned easily into mud after storms. Pigs and chickens roamed the streets, feasting on the garbage that was thrown there because of the lack of organized waste disposal. Still, Brooklyn was well situated on the East River, with ferry crossing to Manhattan, and its economy was expanding rapidly. As Whitman later commented, "Indeed, it is doubtful there is a city with a better situation in the world for beauty, or for utilitarian purposes."⁸

Among the many public celebrations and festivals held there during his youth, he especially recalled the one held on July 4, 1825, for the Marquis de Lafayette, the revolutionary war hero, who was making a tour of America. Lafayette rode in a coach to the corner of Cranberry and Henry streets, where he laid the cornerstone for the Apprentice's Library. In later retellings of the

event, Walt claimed that the hero lifted several of the village children in his arms, among them the six-year-old Walt, whom he kissed on the cheek.

There was just one public school in Brooklyn, District School No. 1 on Concord and Adams streets. Walt attended it from 1825 (possibly earlier) until 1830. Run according to the old-fashioned Lancastrian system, which emphasized rote learning and rigid discipline, the school offered primary students a basic curriculum that included arithmetic, writing, and geography. Walt's teacher, B. B. Hallock, would recall him as "a big, good-natured lad, clumsy and slovenly in appearance." Apparently, Walt was a mediocre student, since Hallock, after learning later he had become a famous writer, said, "We need never be discouraged over anyone."⁹

Walt's education was supplemented by his early exposure to two liberating philosophies: deism and Quakerism. His father, a Jeffersonian rationalist who had known Thomas Paine in his youth, subscribed to the *Free Enquirer*, the radical journal edited by Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen. Wright, widely denounced by conservatives as "the Red Harlot of Infidelity" because of her feminist and freethinking views, elicited Walt's lifelong admiration. Her deistic novel, *Ten Days in Athens*, was one of his childhood favorites. His background in deism doubtless shaped his famous proclamation that his was the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths—the greatest in his belief in God and everyday miracles, the least in his acceptance of any particular church or creed.

Another important influence on him was the Quaker faith, specifically the views of the Quaker leader, Elias Hicks. When Walt was ten, his parents took him to hear the eighty-one-year-old Hicks preach at Morison's Hotel in Brooklyn. Hicks placed great emphasis on the inner light, which Quakers believe put humans directly in touch with God. This doctrine resonated within the poet, who would place total reliance on the inspired voice of the self, irrespective of scriptures and doctrines.

At eleven, Walt left school, apparently to help support his financially struggling family, and began a remarkably varied job career. He first worked as an office boy for two Brooklyn lawyers,

James B. Clarke and his son Edward. The elder Clarke got him a subscription to a circulating library. Walt avidly read *The Arabian Nights*, Walter Scott's novels, and other adventurous works. By the summer of 1831, he was apprenticed to Samuel E. Clements, the editor of the Democratic weekly *Long Island Patriot*. After Clements was fired due to a scandalous lawsuit, Walt continued his training under the *Patriot's* foreman printer, William Hartshorne, a cheerfully sedate, elderly man who had personal reminiscences of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

In the summer of 1832, a terrible time of cholera, Walt's parents moved back to the West Hills area of Long Island. Walt stayed in Brooklyn, working as a compositor for the *Long-Island Star*, a Whig weekly run by the vibrant Alden Spooner. Walt remained with Spooner nearly three years, after which he worked for a compositor in Manhattan. These early printing jobs exposed him to the artisan work arrangements that were threatened by changing print technology. Walt had to do much of the typesetting for these publications by hand, a painstaking but, for him, rewarding activity that presaged his instinct to govern the printing of his poetry with a strong, controlling hand. "I like to supervise the production of my books," he would say, adding that an author "might be the maker even of the body of his book (—set the type, print the book on a press, put a cover on it, all with his own hands)." ¹⁰

In 1836, after a huge fire destroyed many buildings in Manhattan's printing district, Whitman returned to Long Island and began a six-year stint as a roving schoolteacher. His first two teaching posts were in the villages of Norwich and West Babylon, where his family lived successively in 1836. During this time, he stayed with his family, which consisted of his parents and seven siblings: his older brother, Jesse, who may already have gone to sea; his sisters, Mary and Hannah; Edward, the youngest; and three other brothers with patriotic names—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson. In an autobiographical story written a few years later, "My Boys and Girls," Whitman wrote, "Though a bachelor I have several boys and girls I call my own." He described Hannah sentimentally as "the fairest and most delicate of human blossoms," Jeff as "a fat,

hearty, rosy-cheeked youngster," and Mary as a beautiful but vain girl with "misty revealings of thought and wish, that are not well." Playfully, he told of carrying the "immortal Washington" on his shoulders, teaching "the sagacious Jefferson" how to spell, and tumbling with Andrew Jackson.¹¹

In the spring of 1837, Whitman moved to other villages throughout Long Island, teaching a basic curriculum in tiny one-room schoolhouses. His salary was meager—in Smithtown, for instance, he got a paltry \$72.50 for five months of teaching—but he economized by boarding with the families of students. In the spring of 1838, he temporarily abandoned teaching and founded a weekly newspaper in Huntington called the *Long-Islander*. Not only did he serve as the paper's editor, compositor, and pressman, but also each week he did home delivery by riding his horse, Nina, on a thirty-mile circuit in the Huntington area.

Evidently averse to entrepreneurship, he sold the paper after ten months and unsuccessfully sought another printing job in Manhattan, after which he worked in the Long Island town of Jamaica as a typesetter for the *Long Island Democrat*, edited by Democratic partisan James J. Brenton. For the *Democrat*, Whitman wrote a series of articles titled "The Sun-Down Papers." Among these essays was a moralistic one that denounced the use of tobacco, tea, and coffee and another that allegorically represented the uncertainty of religious truth. After a year of working for the *Democrat*, he returned to teaching, though he stayed on for a while as a boarder with the Brentons. Mrs. Brenton, disturbed by his habit of lounging under an apple tree and dreaming the day away, found him lazy, uncouth, and not fit to associate with her daughters.

As a teacher, he received mixed reports. One of his students in Little Bayside, Charles A. Roe, later recalled him as a beardless, ruddy-faced young man who dressed in a black coat with a vest and black pants.¹² His free, easy attitude toward his students was reflected in a mild approach to teaching that was similar to the progressive theories of education reformers such as Horace Mann and Bronson Alcott. Instead of drilling his students and punishing them harshly, as under the old Lancastrian system, he told amusing stories and drew them out by asking provocative