

# A BOUNDARY-DISSOLVING BINDING: THE ECLECTIC COMPOSITION UNDERLYING THE FIRST EDITION OF LEAVES OF GRASS

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“Stuff ’d with the stuff that is coarse and stuff ’d with the  
stuff that is fine”

## **KEY WORDS**

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## **PALABRAS CLAVE**

Primera edición; manuscritos correctamente fechados; notas; documento utópico; diseño; catálogo; encuadernación; daguerrotipo; artes visuales

## **ABSTRACT**

A century and a half has gone by since Whitman’s famous leaves first came off the press. Though the first edition did not reach the multitudinous audience Whitman had in mind, looking back in time, we can conclude that few poetry books have received so much critical attention. Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* has been the object of a titanic amount of criticism. However, scholarship is still at hard pains to explain how Whitman managed to create then a work that seems to belong more to the avant-garde arts of the 20thc. than to a prebellum America. An in-depth analysis of his method of composition, focusing, among other things, on correctly dated manuscripts and

notebooks, his expertise as printer and newspaperman, an his connection with the visual arts, will eventually contribute to shed new light on some of the true merits of this groundbreaking work.

### RESUMEN

Ha transcurrido ya un siglo y medio desde que las famosas hojas de Whitman salieran por primera vez de la imprenta. Aunque Whitman no consiguió con su primera edición llegar a una audiencia multitudinaria, si echamos una mirada atrás en el tiempo, concluiremos que pocos libros de poesía han conseguido recibir tanta atención crítica. *Hojas de hierba* ha sido objeto de una cantidad titánica de estudios críticos. No obstante lo anterior, la crítica aún no ha conseguido explicar de qué forma Whitman consiguió crear una obra que parece enmarcarse más en las artes de vanguardia del siglo XX que en la América prebélica del siglo XIX. Un análisis profundo de su método de composición, un análisis que incida, entre otras cuestiones, en el estudio de los manuscritos y notas correctamente fechados, su destrezas como impresor y periodista, y su conexión con las artes visuales, podría contribuir a que consigamos un mejor enfoque de los méritos de esta obra revolucionaria.

### THE ORIGINS OF THE 1855 EDITION

Over a century and a half after the publication of the first edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* we are still, as Mathew Ward Miller laments in *Collage of Myself: The Making of Leaves of Grass*, "at a loss to explain how Walt Whitman came to create such a groundbreaking work" (6).

Despite the extensive critical bibliography on Walt Whitman, the truth is that scholarship has failed to address the merits of this first edition. Whitman's first edition has often been scrutinized from a one-point perspective rather than viewing it as a modernist, and therefore more complex, work, a composition of shifting angles and overlapping planes, not a fixed, one-dimensional object. In some cases, the critical lenses have focused exclusively on some of its more obvious formal innovations such as the use of free verse and long, proselike lines. In other cases, a surplus of magnetic attraction towards the most lurid aspects of Whitman's intense life, his interests in politics and his sexual orientation among them, has put many a critic on the wrong track, and derailed them from an in-depth analysis of his major breakthroughs.

As a consequence of such reductionist, one-sided approaches, common misunderstandings of Whitman's work still spin freely around this critical galaxy. One example of this may suffice; Miller's very recent investigation, *Collage of Myself: The Making of Leaves of Grass* barely came out last year, proves how an incorrect dating of the manuscripts led to the wrong notion that Whitman had started to draft his poems many years before the first edition was finally published. After correcting the dates of the manuscripts in question and, once he had thoroughly

examined Whitman's disperse archives, Miller concluded that, far from what has been commonly believed, Whitman had started to draft his lines only a year before he published the first edition. Before that date, Whitman had been trying his hand at miscellaneous prose jottings, still uncertain of the final form he would give to the major work he had in mind then. In other words, the idea of Whitman as the quintessential epitome of the poet much before he compiled his first manuscript, or the notion that he knew then for sure that his assembled notes would finally take the form of a poem, and not that of a novel or a play, was a critical invention that Miller's hallmark study has finally come to dispel.

Consensus over the literary relevance of this first edition is, to say the least, almost unanimous. The publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 marked one of the most important literary events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In hindsight, few other poetry books published in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. have captivated so much the imagination of the American audience, if not perhaps in the years immediately following its publication, certainly so in succeeding decades, gaining new relevance as the years have gone by. In this first work we find the essence of Whitman's potential as a poetic bard. Yet, how did he manage to make such a major breakthrough, i.e., how did he weave together so many varied and colorful threads into a harmonic tapestry of that kind? The answer is far from straightforward. Paradoxically enough, though we agree more or less that in this first edition we find the essence of Whitman's potential, we nonetheless come to a deadlock when we have to delve into what makes this first work so essential.

In what follows, I will try to show how Whitman's underlying method of composition sheds new clues if approached from more than one single perspective. I'll proceed first by showing that Whitman's long, free-verse lines are, as the correctly dated manuscripts show, the result of a merging of his prose jottings with the poems he stated to draft a year before the publication of the first edition. In other words, he was seeking out a literary style of his own making to suit his needs, a cauldron in which he could fuse poetry and prose in his own pursuit of the philosopher's stone. Just as he wanted to dissolve the boundaries between poetry and prose so did he aim to break down the barriers between low and high culture. Inspired by this idea, as I'll show below in more detail, he started to work on the design variously priced book formats. Finally, I'll comment how he drew from his connoisseurship of the visual arts and his frequent visits to art galleries to yoke poetry and painting together in his composition (*ut pictura poesis*). His use of variegated catalogues in the first edition are a direct inspiration of the wide array of the working types genre painters exhibited in the galleries he frequented. Following the footsteps of some of the genre painters he admired, who were starting then to depict other races in a natural and dignified manner, Whitman also began to cut across barriers of race in his poetic catalogues.

In approaching Whitman from these different perspectives, (his manuscripts, his role as a printer, editor and bookmaker, his interactions with the visual arts) I

hope to be able to broaden the scope of analysis on the breakthroughs of this first edition. A study of *Leaves of Grass* as an all-fusing, boundary-dissolving work would prove not only more enriching but it would also show that the richness of this work is not easily exhausted in criticism.

### **A NOVEL? A PLAY? A WORK OF SOME SORT?**

As the specter of social breakdown was beginning to haunt America, Whitman hoped that his messianic voice could bring peace to a nation on the verge of being torn asunder by the war. Strikingly so, especially for those of us approaching this book from a 21<sup>st</sup> century viewpoint, the first edition of this book was far from what we might consider an editorial success. To his own disappointment, the book, though friendly received, did not reach the multitudinous audience Whitman had in mind. The book, to be faithful to the truth, sold poorly<sup>1</sup>.

Though Whitman's leaves may be said to have sprung to full blossom in 1855, they certainly did not sprout overnight. A cursory examination of earlier notebooks and manuscripts shows otherwise. Whitman had started to sow the signature seeds of his leaves a few years before. It is not, however, in the *Long Island Democrat* poems of 1838 where these seeds are to be found. The poems were written in a highly ornate, formal style that bears no resemblance with the more mature Whitmanesque line. The evidence garnered from some notebooks of the period leads us to conclude that at some point between 1850 and 1853 a blueprint for his leaves was gestating in Whitman's mind. And then suddenly, almost as if by art of abracadabra, the longer lines begin to crop up in 1854. What catalyst revolutionized his writing? There seems to be no definite answer to this question. Some argue that Whitman went through a mystic experience, others that it was a sexual experience that he found especially inspiring. But, as Miller rightly questions, "why look outside of his writing process?" The truth is that Whitman's dazzling biography has sometimes eclipsed, to the eyes of many Whitman scholars, the value of some of his earlier writing (notebooks and manuscripts). Whitman was not the first to fathom the by then relatively unsounded depths of prose poetry. One of the forerunners of this style was Martin Farquhar's

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<sup>1</sup> Though not an editorial success in Whitman's days, the first edition was then and still remains now a unique binding. According to a recent census, less than 200 copies, out of the nearly 800 copies Whitman printed in 1855, have been found extant. Some of these copies hit record prices at rare book auctions. Besides the scarce number of extant copies, a singular printing error would eventually increase the allure of the first edition. As Ivan Marki records, "because it was printed on a handset press, the first edition could never be reprinted (there were no plates); once the pages were printed, the type was redistributed. The handset type on Rome's hand-inked iron-bed press slipped and moved and in some cases fell off while the 795 copies were being printed, and so arguably each copy of the first edition is unique." This printing error has but added to the value of the edition. The first edition has been auctioned at the dizzying price of \$200,000.

Tupper. His *Proverbial Philosophy*, a book Whitman heavily annotated, turned into an editorial success (more than 300,000 copies sold) thus showing that there was an audience for proselike poetry. But Whitman was the first to take his longer free verse lines to greater lengths. He had been for years experimenting with different forms in order to marshal his new credo to the audience, a message he hoped would bring union to a nation that was on the verge of foundering as a result of numerous tensions, the slavery issue being uppermost in his mind. Yet Whitman did not have a preconceived genre or form in his mind at this time.

On the verso of the first leaf of the “Med Cophósis” manuscript, which dates as either late 1853 or early 1854, Whitman wrote the following words:

Novel? Work of some sort ^Play— instead of sporadic characters— introduce them in large masses, on a far grander scale, —armies —twenty-three full-formed perfect athletes—orbs—take characters through the orbs— “spiritualism” Nobody appears upon the stage simply —but all in huge aggregates nobody speaks alone, whatever is said, is said by an immense number

Beyond reasonable doubt, as the manuscript shows, Whitman was at that time considering a project of some kind, a catalogue populated with a vast array of characters. The reference to “spiritualism” (in between inverted commas) tells us that Whitman, who had been proselytized as a member of this pseudo-scientific religion, was still a follower, though by now perhaps vacillating in his full endorsement of the spiritualist credo.

Further down the leaf, in a section marked with an asterisk, Whitman picked up again on the thread of his idea.

Bring in whole races, or castes, or generations, to express themselves— personify the general objects of the creative and give them voice—everything on the most august scale— a leaf of grass, with its equal voice.—voice of the generations of slaves—of those who have suffered— voices of Lovers—of Night—Day—Space—the stars—the countless ages of the Past—the countless ages of the future—

This, as Miller has documented, “seems to be the earliest extant manuscript in which Whitman used the phrase (here in the singular tense) that would become the central image of his greatest poem” (23). But, curiously enough, Whitman was wavering in his choice of the genre he would employ to give form to this major work he had conceived in his mind: “Novel? Work of some sort ^Play?”

After a perusal of the “Med Cophósis” notes, there is no denial that well into the fifties, Whitman was still unsure about the definite form his leaves would take. In Miller’s own words, “*Leaves of Grass* might well have taken a radically different form” (24). It could as well have been a novel or a play. The upshot of this is that Whitman had been juggling with different genres as if with apples in the air. And if we add to the former the fact that most of his manuscripts from 1854 are written

in prose and that the overtones of his lines echo that of the preface, then we might easily conclude that Whitman was steering towards an all-fusing literary style, one in which the boundaries between genres would appear, to say the least, a little foggy.

But these are not the only boundaries he wished to dissolve. The first edition is, first and foremost, a new gospel addressed to a nation about to fall apart, torn by barriers between races, frontiers between slave territories and free soil, divisions between social classes, and political strifes. As Whitman clarion called in his preface, “of all the nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets” (8). And so, he thought the time was ripe for him to assume that role of the bard in front of his nation. As David Reynolds argues in *Walt Whitman's America*, “the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was a utopian document, suggesting that boundaries of section, class, and race that had become glaringly visible in America’s political arena could be imaginatively dissolved by affirmation of the cross-fertilization of its various cultural arenas” (309). Everything about this first version bespoke of his intentions to break down barriers and free himself from formal restraints. Whitman’s break with the iambic pentameter and a fixed rhythm was but one of his many innovative proposals. Noticeably, however, it was the book appearance and the layout in the inside of the book that stunned the regular bookworm.

With the idea in mind of dissolving the boundaries between low and high culture, to speak as he said, both for the “admirable communes of literary men” and for the “endless races of working people and farmers and seamen,” Whitman used Scotch Roman face, a rather simple typography. The way the words were visually spread on the page had the appearance of popular pamphlets or cheap mass-papers. Whitman had accumulated a versatile experience at his various jobs, or “sits” as he liked to call them, for several newspapers of his days. Since 1831, when he took up an apprentice printing job for the *Long Island Patriot*, Whitman had been connected to positions related to the artisan process involved in printing newspapers. Barely twenty-two years of age, he was raised to head editor of the New York *Aurora*. In 1845, he would start to write his own articles for the *Brooklyn Star*. His career as a newspaper peaked in March 1846, however, when he obtained a job as editor for the commercial *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.

Having tried his hand variously as a printer, editor, compositor and newspaperman, Whitman was, by 1855, an experienced connoisseur of the full process involved in making newspapers. Little wonder, he would put all that expertise at the service of his first edition. But even his notebooks and manuscripts show that Whitman had already assimilated into his writing style the same typographical conventions that could be easily found in any newspaper of the time. The manuscripts appear arranged in columns, a conscious imitation of the layout he was so much acquainted with. In addition to this, he also seemed fond of pasting newspaper clippings directly onto the page. Further still, and following the conventions of newspaper

advertisements, he drew in his notebooks pointing hands to highlight jottings he considered of relevance.

The daily events in the newspapers were then juxtaposed in a rather odd fashion, with the news, “trivial and sensational, highbrow and lowbrow” (Parker, 163) placed on the same page next to each other. Whitman continued to adhere to this practice when he was working as editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, a four-page, well-run newspaper of the city. When arranging the day’s news of his second page, Whitman would engage on the practice juxtaposing a report on a congressional meeting to an account of a suicide. To the modern eye, such a curious arrangement has more the appearance of a surrealist *cadaver exquisis* but the truth is that there was then only short step from this chance series of juxtapositions to Whitman’s variegated catalogues in *Leaves of Grass*.

Surprising though it may seem now, Whitman went through hard pains to find a publishing house that would allow him to reach the wide audience he had in mind for his book. The most prestigious publishing houses seemed reluctant to run the risk of publishing the proselike, eerily unconventional passages of *Leaves of Grass*. The largest publishing firms such as Harpers, the Appletons, or Fowlers and Wells did not hesitate, upon receiving the manuscript, to reject it for publication. A dejected Whitman finally chose to run into the arms of James and Andrew Rome’s printshop. James and Andrew were two Scottish immigrants who, in their leisure time, ran a small printing shop in Brooklyn, very close to Whitman’s family house. The benefits of such small-scale publishing house soon proved far-reaching. For someone like Whitman, so thoroughly familiarized as he was with the printing process involved in bookmaking, this small printshop was a chance to put into practice all his connoisseurship about typography, the visual spread of lettering onto the page, binding, gilding, edging, different formats, etc.

In the early spring of 1855 Whitman rambled every day from his family house on Prince Street, to the Romes’ printshop place at the junction between Cranberry and Fulton. Once there, he supervised the printing of his leaves, often undertaking the printing process himself and setting the type for some of the 95 pages comprising his new book.

The inside of the book was also in full accordance with Whitman’s utopia of dissolving boundaries. The first edition manuscript subverts conventional poetic devices by doing away with the use of titles, headings, section breaks or stanzaic forms. The twelve poems appeared untitled and almost with no substantial breaks, which made it sort of difficult to tell them apart. Rules of punctuation were similarly disobeyed. In part of the preface, Whitman dispensed altogether with commas, periods, or semicolons. In the poems he used ellipsis rather than punctuation marks. As a result, lines flowed onto the pages as swiftly and uninterruptedly as the waters of the Hudson river. The volume could thus be easily read as a long boundary-dissolving poem in conjunction with the fluidity of the vast nature he was praising in his poetry and the different social levels he was addressing. As Whitman

claimed in his preface, “a bard is to be commensurate with a people . . . His spirit responds to his country’s spirit” (7).

Whitman knew that his dream to be absorbed by a wide spectrum of readers across the nation had to be properly encapsulated in a book format pandering to the tastes of all social classes. Accordingly, Whitman designed three different formats with three different prices: a two dollar dark olive green cloth jacket with the title “Leaves of Grass” inscribed on golden letters on the books’ front and back cover; a one dollar green cloth format with less gilding on the title; a 75 cent-priced format in pink or light green paper wrappers. Whitman’s democratic pursuits were thus extended to the physical appearance of his variously priced formats: he wanted to appeal to the audience for fancy books he knew was out there, yet he did not neglect the moneyless bookstore goers. His name was absent from the cover or the spine of the book. For the cover design he used “floriated lettering” to stamp his title: “Leaves of Grass.” Roots are drawn dangling from some of the slanting letters while leaves and flowers appear adorning others. His letters (“Leaves of Grass”), Whitman wants to convey, are rooted in material language, which is from where they take their organic nourishment and luxuriate. Overall, as some of the previous examples have shown, Whitman took great care in every single detail concerning the making of this first edition. As Matt Miller argues in his essay “The Cover of the First Edition of Leaves of Grass,” “for better or worse, Whitman knew, we do judge books by their covers, and no other American author has gone to such lengths to encode his ideas in his books’ physical appearance” (85).

## WHITMAN AND THE VISUAL ARTS

In mid-century America, the visual arts were blooming in full vigor. New art venues, art organizations, and popular exhibitions were but the first visible signs of a true American renaissance in painting. Another major phenomenon was the popularization of photography in the biggest cities. Daguerre’s invention had first disembarked in America around 1838 under the form of daguerreotype. Such was the widespread craze for photography that in just a matter of a few years daguerreotype galleries were sprouting out like mushrooms. In New York City alone, as Beaumont Newhall, author of *The Daguerreotype in America*, records, “there were more daguerreotype galleries than in all England in 1853, and more in Broadway alone than in London” (11). Whitman frequented daguerreotype galleries, sought out the company of daguerreotypists and would even pose for them in nearly 200 occasions throughout his life. He frequented Gabriel Harrison’s studio, set at 283 Fulton, just a few blocks away from Whitman’s Myrtle Avenue house. He would sit there for hours on end while engaging in conversation with prominent artists of the New York arena, William Cullen Bryant, poet, and art mentor, being one of the many illustrious names.



Whitman was a steadfast defender and a compulsive consumer of the visual arts. Besides seeking out the company of painters, sculptors and daguerreotype artists, he proselytized in favor of creating new art venues in Brooklyn. He contributed to found the Brooklyn Art Union. In addition to this, nearly one third of his articles in the years preceding the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* are devoted to the visual arts, proof enough of the enthusiastic zeal with which he championed the visual arts. As an avid consumer of the visual arts, Whitman frequented art galleries and temporal exhibitions alike. His visit to the Crystal Palace exhibition, where quite an amazing array of artwork was hanging from the walls, left him an indelible impression. His eyes were literally mesmerized by this all-encompassing atmosphere of artwork. Whitman scholars have variously discussed how picture galleries and daguerreotypes have influenced Whitman's work. Ruth L. Bohan's *Looking into Walt Whitman* shows to what extent the visual arts were uppermost in Whitman's mind when he was composing *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman, so proactive in developing the visual arts in his Brooklyn community, was then struggling to, as Bohan puts it, "yoke both his person and his poetry to the expressive power of the visual" (14). Whitman's catalogues in his long poem are done in imitation of the spirit he was imbued with when he was admiring the diverse vignettes of American types that genre painters had managed to portray such vividness. Its outspoken "democratic eclecticism" (Reynolds, 295) stirred Whitman's imagination so strongly that he felt the need to create a poetic equivalent of similar proportions. Whitman's colorful catalogues of American characters, from boatmen to politicians, are inspired on many of the paintings he could relish in his numerous visits to art galleries. George Caleb Bingham, a painter of genre scenes depicting fur traders, flatboatmen, raftsmen, fishermen, hunters, politicians and even Daniel Boone, is allegedly one of the genre painters Whitman used as a source of inspiration for his own characters in *Leaves of Grass*.

But Whitman not only applied what he had learned from the visual arts to his catalogues but also to his self-portrait on the title page of his first edition. His portrait appearing on the frontispiece of the first edition shows Whitman's expertise in how to code his new message through the aesthetics of visual presentation. Dressed casually in a carpenter's outfit, an unbuttoned white shirt and a wide-brimmed hat at a slanted angle, Whitman poses as if he had just temporarily made a pause from his daily labors with plank or beam. His right hand resting on his hip and his left hand inside of his pocket give away a portrait of a self-confident Whitman.



(Library of Congress).

No name was attached to this portrait. Attired in his working class clothes, the author, so it seems, wanted to introduce himself to the audience, first and foremost, as one among the common people. Whitman's friend Gabriel Harrison took the daguerreotype whereas Samuel Hollyer, who used the Harrison daguerreotype as the model, did the engraving. In a letter Hollyer confesses that in his first meeting with Whitman, after he had done the engraving, the poet said to him that he would like to add "one or two trifling alterations if they could be made." Which were those "trifling alterations"? Ted Genoway is the first to decipher the riddle. Comparing the different variants, he discovered a major change: "a significant enlargement of the bulge in Whitman's crotch" (98). Whitman wanted this frontispiece image to tally with his reference to "one goodshaped and wellhung" man in the preface.

The inclusion of this photograph as the frontispiece of the book shows that Whitman knew well how to manipulate the visual arts in order to convey powerful messages to his audience. From the first edition to the last one, Whitman seemed actively engaged on trying to render his new gospel more patent through the visual appearance of the book: from jacket design, to interior typography. Whitman was one of the first poets to jump on the bandwagon of mass culture and to take to greater lengths the possibilities that a technologically mediated culture industry afforded him<sup>2</sup>. Many years later, in 1889, Whitman showed that he still had more cards like

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<sup>2</sup> As Michael Davidson argued in *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics*, "it is hard to think of another writer of his era who so thoroughly exploited the possibility of the camera for staging versions of the self" (103).

this up his sleeve. The special birthday edition featured an image of a long bearded Whitman in profile in a state of admiration for a butterfly perched on his finger.



(Library of Congress).

His intention to present himself as a nature poet, one continuing the legacy of Thoreau<sup>3</sup>, seems too obvious to pass unnoticed. But in 1936, a Whitman scholar perusing some of his archives at the Library of Congress found out, to his own surprise, a cardboard butterfly identical to the butterfly of the portrait. “Notoriously artificial, the photograph,” as David Haven Blake states in *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity*, “has much to disclose about Whitman’s relation to the culture of American celebrity. (3). His universally famous “I celebrate myself,” the line opening his canto, is, under this new light, invested with new layers of meaning. Coupled with his “tricky” self-portraits, the line unveils as well Whitman’s intention to fuse his poetry with the art photography and the culture of American celebrity. But, as I will try to argue below, not only was he trying to

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike Thoreau, Whitman’s signature landscapes did not include ponds. As Howard Nelson imaginatively argues in his prologue to *Earth My Likeness*, a collection of nature poems by Walt Whitman:

Thoreau is the pond man par excellence, and the way he knows Walden Pond –its temperatures and depths, its fish and underwater sights, its boundaries and surrounding land . . . is in keeping with the carefulness and clarity of his personality. Melville, on the other hand, is the ocean writer, the contemplator of whales and thousands of miles of water where there is no shore-and who knows where the bottom is?. And Whitman? He is the writer of places where water and land meet –seashore, creek and river bank; river-crossings on ferries, wading in the surf, swimming for beaches (8).

yoke photography and poetry together under the aegis of America's emerging mass culture but he was also trying to fuse painting and poetry, two artistic forms he saw evermore as kindred manifestations.

As stated above, the influence of genre painting upon *Leaves of Grass* goes beyond the use of his catalogue technique. Far from being so, some of the paintings Whitman most fervently admired had their counterpart in a various vignettes of his long poem. One of them was Alfred Jacob's Miller *The Trapper's Wife*. The painting shows an interracial marriage in the midst of the wilderness, at the threshold between the frontiers of the New World and the Old World. The atmosphere, however, is calm; nothing seems to threaten the peace that surrounds the wedding between the trapper and his wife. In the foreground, a few principal witnesses are supervising the ritual yet they are doing so with a relaxed demeanor. In the background of this veritable *tableau vivant* a group of attendants, according to Whitman "her father and his friends," are sitting with their legs crossed.



*The Trapper's Wife* (1837); painting by Alfred Jacob Miller. (Amon Caster Museum).

Drawing from Miller's painting, Whitman puts new emphasis on the harmonious atmosphere in which the wedding takes place. The one-lined "west . . . the bride was a red girl" seems to highlight that this harmonious wedding is a model of miscegenation.

I saw the marriage of the trapper in the open air in the far-  
west . . . the bride was a red girl,  
Her father and his friends sat near cross-legged and  
dumbly smoking . . . they had moccasins to their feet  
and large thick blankets hanging from their shoulders;  
On a bank lounged the trapper . . . he was dressed mostly  
in skins . . . his luxuriant beard and curls protected  
his neck,  
he held his bride by the hand,  
One hand rested on his rifle . . . the other hand held  
Firmly the wrist of the red girl,  
She had long eyelashes . . . her head was bare . . . her  
coarse straight locks descended upon her voluptuous  
limbs and reached to her feet. (1996, 35)

Whitman brings to the fore of attention the natural beauty of the trapper and his wife. Almost a living replica of the famed Pocahontas, the bride is depicted in her statuesque beauty: “long eyelashes” and “coarse straight locks” descending as far as the feet. The trapper wields a rifle, it is true, but the weapon, resting calmly in his hand, is more a token of his need to protect himself from the perils of the wilderness, than a bellicose sign. Whitman, who was fond of Native Americans, had an intention to show that a harmonious fusion of the Old World and the New World was only possible if due respect was shown to the other races, as it is the case in this intermingling of the races. As Ed Folsom puts it, “this marriage on the frontier between the East and the West, the civilized and the savage, anticipates the birth of Whitman’s new American character, emerging from the encounter of Europe and the New World, the refined civilization and the past penetrating the raw topography of the future” (71). A paean to racial blending, Whitman picks up on this painting to fly the flag of his call for a harmonious encounter between the races.

Most surely, Whitman had long been acquainted with George Catlin’s portraits of Indians. Catlin’s paintings of Native Americans in their natural surroundings looked not only realistic but also dignified. In *American Visions*, Robert Hughes tells the story of how Catlin, who had received some training as a lawyer, turned away from his job to devote instead his life to painting. While a young artist in Philadelphia he saw a delegation of Plain Indian Chiefs on their way to Washington. Catlin was so struck by this vision that he set the purpose in his mind to travel west in order to learn more about them. Thus “Catlin” as Hughes calls to our attention, “became the first painter to travel west with the sole purpose of finding out about Indians, as distinct from converting the ‘savage’ to Christianity, annexing territory, or surveying land” (177).

One of Catlin’s most famous paintings was the portrait of Osceola, chief of the Seminoles. This oil painting, now at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, features Osceola, long in reclusion, in the final month of his life. Held captive at

Fort Moultrie in South Carolina in 1937, Osceola knows his former glorious feats are but a dim memory now yet, as the portrait does not obliterate, the Seminole leader's gaze still preserves the dignity he is entitled to after a whole life battling for the Indian cause. A lithograph of Catlin's painting hung on the wall of Whitman's Camden apartment.

Another major influence on Whitman was William Sidney Mount, a genre painter famous for his catalogues of working-class types. Whitman, who counted Mount among his artist friends, shared with him a common interest in phrenology and a passion for theatre. The section on the African American team driver in *Leaves of Grass* is said to be inspired in Mount's *Farmers Noonning*, a painting which epitomizes one of Mount's favorite subject matter, workers resting at ease in nature during a break from work. Mount's painting depicts five farmers carousing at noon under a tree. A glimmering light shines on one of them, a robust "Negro" farmer wearing an unbuttoned white shirt, thus bringing his gigantic figure to the forefront of our attention. As he is resting half-asleep on a hay mound, he is being tickled with a hay straw a young boy is wielding in his left hand. This scene would have been labeled as one more Arcadian commonplace, were it not for the African American laborer that Mount so harmoniously integrated into the composition.



*Farmers Noonning* (1836); painting by William Sidney Mount. (Library of Congress).

Somewhat influenced by Mount's painting, Whitman carves out a portrait of a Herculean African American team driver, a sculptural beauty commandeering a team of horses at full gallop as if he were a modern version of heroic Ben-Hur driving his chariot.

The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses . . .  
the block swags underneath on its tied-over chain,  
The negro that drives the long dray of the stone-yard . . .  
steady and tall he stands pois'd on one leg on the  
string-piece,  
His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens  
over his hip-band,  
His glance is calm and commanding . . . he tosses the  
slouch of his hat away from his forehead,  
The sun falls on his crispy hair and moustache . . . falls  
on the black of his polish'd and perfect limbs.

I behold the picturesque giant and love him . . . and I do  
not stop there,  
I go with the team also. (1996, 37)

Just as the African American in Mount's painting is depicted with a white open shirt, baring his wide chest to the sun, so does the "Negro" team driver in Whitman's section expose his neck and chest: "His blue shirt exposes his ample neck." The team driver, in similar fashion to the farmer of Mount's portrait, appears as "a picturesque giant." But, in contrast to the nooning farmer, the driver is shown at hard work commandeering his team of horses with the skills of a horse trainer. He appears to be performing his task under a state of self-control, at least that is the impression his "calm and commanding" glance conveys to us. But driving a team of four horses at full gallop is never an easy job and that's why he has to toss "the slouch of his hat away from his forehead." The light shines on the bulk of this robust teamdriver ("falls on the black of his polish'd and perfect limbs") as it did in the case of his nooning counterpart, thus foregrounding their figures and placing them above the rest of the composition. In the last lines of this vignette, Whitman confesses his ongoing love for his character, and his intention to join him in his ride. With this expression of love and full allegiance to whatever course the black rider may take, Whitman shows that he wants his leaves of grass to grow, as he said, "among black folks as among white."

## **THE TRIAL AND THE STRANGE FATE OF WHITMAN'S BRAIN**

Its friendly reception notwithstanding, *Leaves of Grass* found many obstacles on its way to reach the multitudinous audience Whitman had in mind. Dark clouds

were present from the start, and Whitman must have surely felt signs of a bad omen when he first handed the book he had just printed to a bookseller on Nassau Street (Romes had printed about 800 copies of the book). A desultory glimpse to the content of the book sufficed for the bookseller to order its removal from the shelves on the grounds of its offensive nature. His outspoken confessions of carnal hunger—"I believe in the flesh and the appetites" (1996, 55)—and his injunctions to the sea—"Dash me with amorous wet . . . I can repay you" (1996, 48)—were considered obscene.

Though he tried hard to find the means to make his fist copies circulate, the road ahead proved full of obstacles. The Fowler brothers, who had previously accepted to distribute Whitman's book, more in honor to their common phrenologist beliefs than for reasons of any other nature, soon regretted their decision when the word spread that the book was in breach of proper rules of morality. Fowlers gave for free the extant copies of the second edition and resigned the whole edition. This raucous clamor against the offensive content of the first edition soon reached the shores of the other side of the Atlantic. In 1856, the English magazine *Saturday Review* lampooned Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* with incensed words:

After every five or six pages [ . . . ] Mr. Whitman suddenly becomes very intelligible, but exceedingly obscene. If the *Leaves of Grass* should come into anybody's possession, our advice is to throw them immediately behind the fire." (Bosmajian, 194)

Libraries across the major cities refused to buy the book. In 1870, Noah Porter, president of Yale University, warned against the corrupting effect that such a book could have on the purity of their generation. "A generation cannot be entirely pure," he clamors, "which tolerates writers who, like Walt Whitman, commit, in writing, an offense like that indictable at common law of walking naked through the streets" (Sova, 210). Whitman's confession of his eagerness to "go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked" was the spark that set Porter's imagination ablaze. In 1881 *Leaves of Grass* was finally banned in Boston for sexually explicit language, the expurgation of offending passages being demanded. An ominous harbinger of more censure to come in the near future.

In "The Strange Fate of Whitman's Brain," Burrell Brian tells how Whitman's brain, sent to a laboratory for a phrenological study, was shattered into pieces after slipping off the hands of a "careless attendant in the laboratory." In just a few decades we shall be celebrating the bicentenary in homage to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Yet further work needs to be done if we want to fully answer how Whitman managed to design in his mind such an advanced project, a work that belongs more to the 20<sup>th</sup> century than to a prebellum America still relatively isolated from the cultural tides of European art. What tube of spacetime did Whitman access to travel in an instant to such a distant region of time? There is no definite answer, but what seems undisputable is that Whitman's first edition seems closer to William Carlos



Williams' use of the vernacular and Charles Olson's "Open Field" than to his own contemporaries. In the meantime, and while we try to find a conclusive response to this, if such there be, it would be best to treat the legacy of his brain, "the ultimate brain," as Whitman himself referred to it, with proper care; otherwise, it will fall off once again from our scholarly hands as it did from those of that "careless attendant" in the laboratory.

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