

## *A Song for Occupations*

### Whitman the Rough

Why what have you thought of yourself?  
Is it you then that thought yourself less?  
Is it you that thought the President greater than you? or  
the rich better off than you? or the educated wiser than  
you?  
Because you are greasy or pimpled—or that you was once  
drunk, or a thief, or diseased, or rheumatic, or a pros-  
titute—or are so now—or from frivolity or impo-  
tence—or that you are no scholar, and never saw your  
name in print . . . do you give in that you are any less  
immortal?

**W**hen Walt Whitman sent Ralph Waldo Emerson a copy of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he received in reply an enthusiastic letter that, without asking the author's permission, Whitman printed in the second (1856) edition of his book. Whitman added his own rambling and self-promoting public response in which he addressed Emerson as "Master." In this letter to Emerson, Whitman attacked the old class lines of Europe, and declared that American poets refuse to be classed off.

Poets here, literats here, are to rest on organic different bases from other countries; not a class set apart, circling only in the

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circle of themselves, modest and pretty, desperately scratching for rhymes, pallid with white paper, shut off, aware of the old pictures and traditions of the race, but unaware of the actual race around them.

In his gracious letter, Emerson had applauded the “free & brave thought” of *Leaves of Grass*. He spent the summer praising the book to his Concord circle. Discouraged by their response, he wrote to Thomas Carlyle:

One book, last summer, came out in New York, a nondescript monster which yet had terrible eyes and buffalo strength, and was indisputably American—which I thought to send you, but the book throve so badly with the few to whom I showed it, and wanted good morals so much, that I never did. Yet I believe now again, I shall. It is called *Leaves of Grass*,—was written and printed by a journeyman printer in Brooklyn, New York, named Walter Whitman; and after you have looked into it, if you think, as you may, that it is only an auctioneer’s inventory of a warehouse, you can light your pipe with it. (363)

By the time Emerson read *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman was almost forty years old. He had taught school, edited newspapers in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and New Orleans, published a temperance novel, and for almost twenty years had been contributing short stories and articles to the same literary journals as Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne. Yet Emerson chose to identify him as “a journeyman printer.” It’s true that in the poem, Whitman chose to represent himself as a rough from the working class. The now familiar portrait of the author on the title page showed Whitman in informal dress, with open collar. But Emerson went out of his way to meet Whitman, visiting him in Brooklyn and dining with him twice. He also sent his friends to meet Whitman—including Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, and Moncure Conway. By the time he wrote to Carlyle, Emerson was no longer writing about a mysterious stranger. Identifying the author as a

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printer may have served him in the same way that identifying Duck as a thresher or Yearsley as a milkwoman served their patrons—giving him a way to approve of a book with “buffalo strength” but lacking the literary taste that would make it acceptable to his peers.

Only a year younger than Karl Marx, Whitman had the advantage over his European contemporary of immersion in the flexible class structure of antebellum boomtown New York. Whitman watched members of his family rise to comfortable middle-class status while others sank into poverty, despair, prostitution, and premature death. He himself bobbed up and down on an annual, sometimes daily, basis, as he bounced from journeyman printer to editor to bookseller to carpenter to real estate speculator to freelance journalist to volunteer nurse—and, in later life, from civil servant to unemployed poet to comfortable government sinecurist to dependent invalid to minor celebrity to impoverished but beloved old man. He had the wide experience to appreciate the material base of society, but aspired only to healthy roughneck living. Whitman appreciated money, but never cared to earn much of it, was careless and irresponsible, walked away from good money building houses to devote most of two years to writing the first edition of his little book, and when he did have money used it to attend Italian operas and buy gifts for his family and favorite young men.

The decades that formed Walt Whitman, the 1830s and 1840s, were years of rapid radical change in the United States, years of optimism and plunder. Looking back on the lawless genocidal policies of President Andrew Jackson toward Native Americans, it’s difficult to recall that for many Americans, Jackson embodied the promises of liberty and equality only latent in the Declaration of Independence. A self-educated man from the Tennessee frontier, Jackson’s contempt for the ethics, laws, and proprieties of Federalist merchants, judges, and bankers translated into an

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image of populist challenge to conservative institutions. As related in Alice Felt Tyler's *Freedom's Ferment* or even in a parody of reform such as Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*, the two decades were a time of utopian experiment and liberating promise. As a young journalist and man about Manhattan, Whitman was in the front row to gaze on every passing bandwagon. Often, he would swing aboard for a brief or extended ride. Whitman tempered the revolutionary patriotism and class consciousness of his carpenter father with the embracing generosity of his Quaker mother. He added to that stew his own infatuation with the rough B'hoys of the Bowery.

Through me many long dumb voices,  
Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,  
Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,  
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and  
    dwarfs,  
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,  
And of the threads that connect the stars—and of wombs, and  
    of the fatherstuff,  
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,  
Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,  
Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung.

Among Whitman's journalistic assignments, he was directed by the *New York Evening Post* in 1851 to review an exhibition of paintings at the Brooklyn Art Union. He was particularly charmed by Walter Libbey's picture of "a handsome, healthy country boy" playing a flute.

He has a brown wool hat, ornamented with a feather; rolled-up shirt sleeves, a flowing red cravat on his neck, and a narrow leather belt buckled round his waist. . . . Abroad, a similar subject would show the boy as handsome, perhaps, but he would be a young boor, and nothing more. The stamp of class is, in this way, upon all the fine scenes of the European painters . . . while in this boy of Walter Libbey's, there is nothing to prevent his

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becoming a President, or even an editor of a leading newspaper.  
(*Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, 237–38)

Or even a Homer of the masses?

The time that it took Whitman to write and ready for publication the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* remains conjectural. The best guess has only fragments preceding 1854. In any case, 1855–56 were years of intense, inspired composition. The first edition of 1855 was followed by another edition just a year later that included twenty new poems plus revisions to many of the twelve that appeared in the first. Among the poems written that year were “A Woman Waits for Me,” “Spontaneous Me,” “Respondez,” and those that would eventually be titled “This Compost,” “Salut au Monde,” “To a Foiled European Revolutionnaire,” “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” and “Song of the Open Road.”

These years were also the most eventful of Whitman’s New York literary career, effectively ended with his move to Washington during the Civil War. This was the time of his most frequent visits to Pfaff’s, the underground saloon at Bleecker and Broadway that was the hangout for New York bohemia. It’s at Pfaff’s that Whitman became close with Henry Clapp, translator of the socialist Fourier, author of the free-love tract *Husband vs. Wife*, and editor of the *Saturday Press*, a popular magazine that regularly printed Whitman’s poems and was one of the staunchest promoters of *Leaves of Grass*. Among other frequenters of Pfaff’s with whom Whitman struck up friendships were Ada Clare (the “Queen of Bohemia” and unmarried mother of a son whose father was composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk), the actress Adah Isaacs Menken (notorious as the “Naked Lady” of Broadway, she was at this time married to a heavyweight boxing champion), the humorist Artemus Ward, the young careerist William Dean Howells, and many other

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prominent writers and journalists whose reputations failed to outlive them. When Whitman was not at Pfaff's, he was a frequent guest at the house of his friend Mrs. Abby Price, a writer and lecturer in the antislavery, women's rights, and dress reform causes. The Price household included a Swedenborgian boarder, with whom Whitman spent many hours talking about spiritual matters.

During this time of intense poetic composition, Whitman also wrote an exposé, "The Slave Trade—Fitting Out Vessels in the Port of New York," that appeared in the August 2, 1856, edition of *Life Illustrated*. Though the trade had been outlawed for half a century, Whitman claimed that it flourished openly from the port of New York, with law officials failing to enforce the statutes and maybe even conspiring to profit from it. He wrote that within the previous three years, eighteen slave ships had sailed from the port. Yet since 1845, there had been few arrests for violating the ban—and no convictions. Whitman's contempt for slavery and those who defended it was ardent and explicit. Never was that contempt more forcefully expressed than in the essay he wrote that summer attacking the "three hundred and fifty thousand" slave masters who were nefariously undermining democracy in a nation of thirty million.

*The Eighteenth Presidency* remains Whitman's most angry class-conscious prose. The author set his fiery essay in type, printed proofs, and offered the stereotypes free to any publisher or "rich individual" who would distribute it. Yet it remained in proofs during Whitman's lifetime and has seldom been reprinted since. Perhaps the author was too critical of the major political parties and the delegates to their conventions; perhaps his open call to American workers was considered too class-volatile. It's not in Mark Van Doren's *The Portable Walt Whitman* or James E. Miller Jr.'s *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, the standard classroom editions for most of the last fifty years. Nor is it included in Gary Schmidgall's selected Whitman. Justin

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Kaplan's Library of America *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* does include it, tucked at the back of the book among "Supplementary Prose."

Directed to young workmen in all parts of the country, *The Eighteenth Presidency* is a screed against the presidential candidates nominated by the major party conventions that year, James Buchanan and Millard Fillmore, whom Whitman derides as servants to slave masters. But Whitman begins the essay with a brief lesson on class, comparing the class divisions of old Europe to the theoretical classlessness of the United States. The American theory has not been realized, however, and Whitman complains that the practice of a few politicians representing the richest interests more closely resembles old ruling notions. He is incredulous.

Are lawyers, dough-faces, and the three hundred and fifty thousand owners of slaves, to sponge the mastership of thirty millions? Where is the real America?

*The Eighteenth Presidency* veers from buoyant celebratory catalogs of Americans at work and play to savage denunciations of the cynical politicians who exploit the good nature and endless energy of these "sturdy American freemen." The stunning juxtapositions of patriotic praise and desperate outrage are consonant with the contradictions that charge Whitman's poems from this period. The essay is inflamed by the same poetic and political heat that fires the early *Leaves*, and has an urgency missing from Whitman's later, more reflective prose. Whatever the virtues of his other compositions, at no other time in his life does he write with such fire, and surely not this savage humor. For example, this Swiftian list of delegates to the major party conventions of 1856:

WHO ARE THEY PERSONALLY?

Office-holders, office-seekers, robbers, pimps, exclusives, malignants, conspirators, murderers, fancy-men, post-masters, cus-

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tom-house clerks, contractors, kept-editors, spaniels well-trained to carry and fetch, jobbers, infidels, disunionists, terrorists, mail-riflers, slave-catchers, pushers of slavery, creatures of the President, creatures of would-be Presidents, spies, blowers, electioneers, body-snatchers, bawlers, bribers, compromisers, runaways, lobbyists, sponges, ruined sports, expelled gamblers, policy backers, monte-dealers, duelists, carriers of concealed weapons, blind men, deaf men, pimpled men, scarred inside with the vile disorder, gaudy outside with gold chains made from the people's money and harlot's money twisted together; crawling, serpentine men, the lousy combings and born freedom sellers of the earth. (*Complete Poetry*, ed. Kaplan, 1313–14)

Whitman insists “that Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and all the great Presidents and primal warriors and sages were declared abolitionists.” He proposes “One or Two Radical Parts of the American Theory of Government”:

Man can not hold property in man. . . . Every rational uncriminal person, twenty-one years old, should be eligible to vote, on actual residence, no other requirement needed. . . . The whole American government is in itself simply a compact with each individual . . . to protect each one's life, liberty, industry, acquisitions, without excepting one single individual out of the whole number, and without making ignominious distinctions. This is government sublime; this is equal; otherwise it is a government of castes, on exactly the same principles with the kingdoms of Europe. (1320)

*The Eighteenth Presidency* is charged by partisan Old Testament–like prophecies, call-and-response bursts of headline journalism and brisk brute paragraphs, and vigorously uncharacteristic satiric darts. Among Whitman's poems, only “Respondez” manifests the same angry disillusion. And among his poems, only “Respondez” has shared the same sort of publishing history. Though Whitman included it in the 1856 edition of *Leaves*,

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it provoked such angry attack that Whitman deleted most of the poem from later editions, keeping only its ghostly echoes in “Reversals” and “Transpositions.”

Let all the men of These States stand aside for a few  
smouchers! let the few seize on what they choose! let the  
rest gawk, giggle, starve, obey!  
Let shadows be furnish'd with genitals! let substances be  
deprived of their genitals!  
Let there be wealthy and immense cities—but still through any  
of them, not a single poet, savior, knower, lover!  
Let the infidels of These States laugh all faith away!  
If one man be found who has faith, let the rest set upon him!  
.....  
Let a man seek pleasure everywhere except in himself!  
Let a woman seek pleasure everywhere except in herself!  
(What real happiness have you had one single hour through  
your whole life?)

(*Complete Poetry*, ed. Miller, 396–97)

The manic chockablock invention that characterizes the 1856 edition of *Leaves* and *The Eighteenth Presidency* will find no analog in American poetry until *Howl* is published a century later. Whitman emerged from the Civil War mellowed by his service to the hospitalized and fatigued by the illness that he suffered near the war's end. But the courage and good nature of his wounded boys pledged him more than ever to America's new democratic era, and he would continue to discourse on the same obsessive themes in *Specimen Days* and *Democratic Vistas*. Never again, however, would he write with the urgent ecstatic edge that characterizes the poems and prose of 1855–56.

Let the people sprawl with yearning aimless hands! Let their  
tongues be broken! Let their eyes be discouraged! Let none  
descend into their hearts with the fresh lusciousness of  
love! . . .

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Let the theory of America still be management, caste,  
comparison! (Say! what other theory would you?)  
Let them that distrust birth and death lead the rest! (Say! why  
shall they not lead you?)  
Let the crust of hell be neared and trod on! Let the days be  
darker than the nights! Let slumber bring less slumber than  
waking-time brings!  
Let the world never appear to him or her for whom it was all  
made!

(*Complete Poetry*, ed. Miller, 395)

By the time he published *November Boughs* thirty years later (1887), democracy was still much on Whitman's mind, but he was more likely to draw prudent distinctions between the greatness of art and its political implications. In an essay on Shakespeare, but especially in essays on Carlyle and Tennyson, he was willing to forgive, even appreciate, an antidemocratic bias.

The course of progressive politics (democracy) is so certain and resistless, not only in America but in Europe, that we can well afford the warning calls, threats, checks, neutralizings, in imaginative literature, or any department, of such deep-sounding and high-soaring voices as Carlyle's or Tennyson's. (*Complete Poetry*, ed. Kaplan, 1163)

His reminiscences of these English authors accord them the judicious respect he pays in his later writings to conservative, respectable American peers such as Longfellow and Lowell. But if you are looking for affection, you must turn to his much longer essay on the Scot ploughboy, Robert Burns. He admits that Burns has "little or no spirituality," and that he gives "melodies, and now and then the simplest and sweetest ones; but harmonies, complications, oratorios in words, never." But he calls Burns "in some respects, the most interesting personality among singers," and finds in his songs special qualities to endear him to Americans. After assessing from some critical distance

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the successes and limits of Burns's poems, the aged Whitman admits that his own favorites are those indelicate ditties often censored from popular editions.

[Burns] treats fresh, often coarse, natural occurrences, loves, persons, not like many new and some old poets in a genteel style of gilt and china, or at second or third removes, but in their own born atmosphere, laughter, sweat, unction. . . . Is there not something in the very neglect, unfinish, careless nudity, slovenly hiatus, coming from intrinsic genius, and not "put on," that secretly pleases the soul more than the wrought and re-wrought polish of the most perfect verse? (1159)

Though the trials of American expansion and Gilded Age corruption caused Whitman's faith in democracy occasionally to waver, by the end of his life he was proclaiming with greater zeal than ever the ability of a new, classless American literature to hearten the common people of all lands. In *A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads*, he writes,

Of the great poems receiv'd from abroad and from the ages, and to-day enveloping and penetrating America, is there one that is consistent with these United States, or essentially applicable to them as they are and are to be? Is there one whose underlying basis is not a denial and insult to democracy? . . . [T]he Old World has had the poems of myths, fictions, feudalism, conquest, caste, dynastic wars, and splendid exceptional characters and affairs, which have been great; but the New World needs the poems of realities and science and of the democratic average and basic equality, which shall be greater. In the centre of all, and object of all, stands the Human Being, towards whose heroic and spiritual evolution poems and everything directly or indirectly tend, Old World or New. (*Complete Poetry*, ed. Kaplan, 663-64)

Without yielding an inch the working-man and working-woman were to be in my pages from first to last. The ranges of

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heroism and loftiness with which Greek and feudal poets endow'd their god-like or lordly born characters—indeed prouder and better based and with fuller ranges than those—I was to endow the democratic averages of America. (*Complete Poetry*, ed. Kaplan, 668)

In the prefaces Whitman composed in 1887 for the English editions of *Specimen Days*, Whitman summarized for European readers the “reason-for-being” of his books.

[I]n the volume, as below any page of mine, anywhere, ever remains, for seen or unseen basis-phrase, GOOD-WILL BETWEEN THE COMMON PEOPLE OF ALL NATIONS. (1193)

And in the preface to the English edition of *Democratic Vistas*, published the following year, he continued to proclaim that the “great test or trial case” of America “means, at least, eligibility to Enlightenment, Democracy, and Fair-show for the bulk, the common people of all civilized nations” (1195).

When the psalm sings instead of the singer,  
When the script preaches instead of the preacher,  
When the pulpit descends and goes instead of the carver that  
    carved the supporting desk,  
When the sacred vessels or the bits of the eucharist, or the lath  
    and plast, procreate as effectually as the young silversmiths  
    or bakers, or the masons in their overalls,  
When a university course convinces like a slumbering woman  
    and child convince,  
When the minted gold in the vault smiles like the  
    nightwatchman's daughter,  
When warrantee deeds loafe in chairs opposite and are my  
    friendly companions,  
I intend to reach them my hand and make as much of them as I  
    do of men and women.