Two celebrations of Walt Whitman's bicentenary in New York City

Fred Mazelis
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Walt Whitman: Bard of Democracy, at Morgan Library and Museum, through September 15, 2019

Walt Whitman: America's Poet, at New York Public Library, Central Branch, through July 27, 2019

The 19th century saw a flowering of American poetry. Among the many important figures of the period—including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson—Walt Whitman occupies a special place. Some reasons for his particular fame are suggested by the names of two exhibitions currently on view in New York City in observance of the 200th anniversary of his birth. He was the foremost "bard of democracy," and he has often been called "America's Poet."

The Morgan Library and Museum has drawn on its own holdings of Whitman's works and memorabilia, and also includes some material in its exhibition from the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. The New York Public Library has one of the largest collections of Whitman's correspondence, original editions and other materials. Both of these exhibitions are well worth a visit, as an introduction to the work and the continuing legacy of this trailblazing figure. Whitman met with relatively little critical or commercial success until fairly late in his lifetime, but his unique contribution as both a poet and a very public figure evokes more interest than ever, and has much to say to the world today.

Born in Long Island in 1819, Whitman was brought up in Brooklyn, long before it merged in 1898 to form New York City in its present boundaries. His enormous literary ambition found its first poetic expression in *Leaves of Grass*, just 12 poems, published on July 4, 1855. That small book, however, emerged from many years of varied experiences in a city that was booming in the decades before the Civil War. Whitman was a printer's apprentice, then a journeyman printer, followed by many other jobs, including journalist, teacher and newspaper editor. While still in his 20s, he wrote and edited for many New York and Brooklyn newspapers. The Public Library exhibition displays some samples of Whitman's early journalism.

Whitman later wrote that *Leaves of Grass* "arose out of my life in Brooklyn and New York from 1838 to 1853, absorbing a million people, for 15 years, with an intensity, an eagerness, and an abandon, probably never equaled."

Whitman was driven to find expression for his feelings and sentiments in the language of poetry. *Leaves of Grass* is often celebrated as a paean to subjectivity and individualism, but Whitman's own words about "absorbing a million people" show that this is a very one-sided appreciation. He wrote of himself as a part of the whole: "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear." "Whoever degrades another degrades me, And whatever is done or said returns at last to me," he wrote. "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he absorbs it."

Leaves of Grass stood apart from most of what was being written both in form and in content. Whitman's free verse was unusual, and it was accompanied by the use of the vernacular, of sensual language and imagery that was considered "vulgar" by the custodians of cultural criticism.

F.O. Matthiessen in his *American Renaissance* (1941) suggested that, according to Whitman's way of thinking, "Living speech could come to a man only through his absorption in the life surrounding him. He must learn that the final decisions of language are not made by dictionary makers but by 'the masses, people nearest the concrete, having most to do with actual land and sea.'"

Whitman's form was wedded to a democratic content, poetry that took as its subject the lives of ordinary working people, as demonstrated by some of the most famous lines of *Leaves of Grass*:

> I I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume,
> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
> I loafe and invite my soul,
> I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass…
> Not I, nor anyone else can travel that road for you.
> You must travel it by yourself.
> It is not far. It is within reach.
> Perhaps you have been on it since you were born, and did not know.
> Perhaps it is everywhere—on water and land…
> I am large, I contain multitudes…
> I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
> I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.
> I HEAR America singing, the varied carols I hear;
> Those of mechanics—each one singing his, as it should be, blithe and strong;
> The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank or beam,
> The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work;
> The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat—the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck…

Whitman's poetry did not at first meet with great interest or acclaim. A sign of the fame that awaited the newly published poet came in the rapturous response from Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous writer and founder of New England Transcendentalism. The exhibition at the Morgan Library includes an autograph copy of the letter sent by Emerson to Whitman on July 21, 1855, only weeks after publication of the poems, in which Emerson wrote, "I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom America has yet contributed…I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for

such a start."

An especially interesting section at the Morgan exhibition displays an autograph manuscript of an essay entitled, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" This work was written in 1855-56, as a response to the presidential race involving Millard Fillmore, James Buchanan, and John C. Frémont, right on the heels of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. "The Eighteenth Presidency!," though not published in Whitman's lifetime, sheds some light on the poet's social and political concerns during this period. In the essay Whitman refers to the "crawling, serpentine men" leading the country, betraying its ideals with their support for slavery.

A loyal Democrat who had brothers named after Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, he was not an abolitionist and there were times when he voiced ignorant views on race, but his anti-slavery views had gradually strengthened in the decade preceding the Civil War. The Fugitive Slave Act had been passed by Congress a few years earlier, mandating the return of escaped slaves to their masters. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 laid the basis for the extension of slavery into the territories seeking statehood. The ruthlessness of the pro-slavery elements, their frenzy born of desperation and weakness, contributed to the radicalization of millions, including Whitman.

The Civil War was only a few years off. The poet sensed that a reckoning was coming. Although he supported Democrat Stephen Douglas in his 1858 debates with Abraham Lincoln, by the time of Lincoln's election Whitman was an enthusiastic adherent of the new president.

The lifelong struggle of Whitman to add to and continually produce new editions of *Leaves of Grass*, which grew to 438 pages in the "deathbed edition" published soon after his passing, was shaped by the struggle against slavery, by the Civil War and its aftermath. Whitman, in notes written in 1859, had called himself, in characteristically outspoken and immodest language, "the Bard of Democracy."

The poet called the war "the very center, circumference, umbilicus, of my whole career." He traveled to Washington and settled there, working as a visitor and volunteer nurse at hospitals. He later said that he had made over 600 visits and ministered in one way or another to nearly 100,000 sick and wounded soldiers. Dozens of poems on the Civil War followed, in *Drum Taps*, published in 1865.

Incorporated into the growing *Leaves of Grass*, these included "O Captain! My Captain!" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," two of his most famous and popular poems, written in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of Lincoln. Whitman is supposed to have said he was almost sorry he wrote "O Captain!" because, with its more conventional rhyme and imagery, it had drawn so much attention away from the rest of his work.

In 1860-61 Whitman had published a third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, with 146 new poems. These included celebrations of what the poet called "manly love." The sensuality of the earlier poems had now blossomed into more openly homoerotic themes, and critics were scandalized. The poet, of course, never discussed his private life. The term for homosexuality had not even been coined at that time, and did not come into usage in the US until some decades later.

The Morgan Library exhibition, however, does refer to the intimate friendship of Whitman and Peter Doyle, the Irish immigrant streetcar conductor whom he met in Washington in 1865. The two were inseparable for eight years, as the exhibition notes. Included here is the well-known photograph of Whitman and Doyle, along with some correspondence with the man whom the poet addressed as "my darling boy."

The poet's work during the war contributed to his growing reputation as the "Good Gray Poet." In his later years Whitman was especially associated with the memory of Lincoln. He gave annual lectures commemorating the assassination of the martyred president. The Morgan exhibition includes a printed ticket for the lecture given by Whitman at New York's Madison Square Garden in 1887. Doyle, who had been at Ford's Theatre when Lincoln was killed, had given Whitman the details he needed to make the tragic events come alive. Remarkably, the audience when Whitman spoke in 1887 included Cuban revolutionary José Martí, author Mark Twain and industrialist Andrew Carnegie.

Another section of this exhibition notes Whitman's interest in the still young medium of photography. Over the decades he was the subject of 130 professional photos, including the famous 1854 daguerreotype that was used in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the 1865 portrait by Matthew Brady and later depictions of the "Good Gray Poet" as an aging and kindly symbol of the struggles of the recent past.

Whitman, like his almost exact contemporary Frederick Douglass, gave eloquent voice to the revolutionary and democratic impulses that found expression in the war that put an end to chattel slavery. Like Douglass as well, he had difficulty orienting himself in the decades following the Civil War. He remained a radical, a humanist, but he could see little alternative to the America of the Gilded Age, other than an America of artisan craftsmen that was rapidly disappearing.

During the last years of his life in Camden, New Jersey, Whitman's comments were taken down by the much younger Horace Traubel, who eventually accumulated some 5,000 pages of material drawn from their conversations. The editor of a recently published abridged version of the material (*Walt Whitman Speaks: His Final Thoughts on Life, Writing, Spirituality, and the Promise of America*, 2019), Brenda Wineapple, comments that Traubel "pushed back against some of Whitman's biases, both men enjoying the give-and-take. For Traubel was a committed socialist, which Whitman decidedly was not. 'How much have you looked into the subject of the economic origin of things we call vices, evils, sins?' Traubel gently needled his friend. Smiling, Whitman replied with good humor, 'You know how I shy at problems, duties, consciences: you seem to like to trip me with your pertinent impertinences.'"

Left-wing literary critic Newton Arvin in *Whitman* (1938) was quite insistent that Whitman was a socialist, but this over-simplifies a complicated historical process and substitutes an element of wishful thinking for concrete social and intellectual realities.

The Public Library exhibition contains an interesting section on the impact of Whitman on American culture. A wall is given over to copies of books of poetry and prose by writers inspired or shaped by Whitman: Langston Hughes, William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Rexroth, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg and many others.

Also available are brief audio excerpts from musical figures influenced by Whitman, including Woody Guthrie's "Pastures of Plenty" and Kurt Weill, who composed "Three Whitman Songs" in 1942, just after the entry of the US into the Second World War.

There are, as well, brief video excerpts from films, including D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) and *Manhatta* (1921), the famous avant-garde 10-minute film created by painter Charles Sheeler and photographer Paul Strand. These silent films paid tribute to and were inspired by Whitman. Griffith used the poet's line, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," accompanying a recurring shot of Lillian Gish as Eternal Motherhood, as a "unifying visual and thematic element" in his film. *Manhatta*'s intertitles use excerpts from *Leaves of Grass* to convey what the exhibition calls "a day in the life of New York City," with its bustle, energy, architecture and industry, at a time when New York was booming as never before.

The public library exhibition prominently features the following profound excerpt from the preface to the very first edition of *Leaves of Grass*: "Past and present and future are not disjoined but joined. The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is…The greatest poet…places himself where the future becomes present." Clearly Whitman wrote with a sense of history, of his own place in history, of the connection between the present and the past and with an

optimism about the future.

While it may be appropriate to call Whitman “America’s poet,” that title should not be seen as an expression of a narrow nationalism. His American nationalism, though contradictory, was not of a chauvinist or exclusionary character. In “Salut Au Monde,” one of his poems in *Leaves of Grass*, he offers a fraternal greeting to the world:

> What cities the light or warmth penetrates
> I penetrate those cities myself
> All islands to which birds wing their way
> I wing my way myself.
> Toward you all, in America’s name,
> I raise high the perpendicular hand,
> I make the signal,
> To remain after me in sight forever,
> For all the haunts and homes of men.

Indeed, Matthiessen in *American Renaissance* points out that Whitman’s “belief in the need to speak not merely for Americans but for the workers of all lands seems to have given the impetus for his odd habit of introducing random words from other languages, to the point of talking about ‘the ouvrier class’!”

James P. Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism, who was born just two years before Whitman’s death, had occasion in 1950 to quote Walt Whitman. Cannon said, “I believe in the power of fraternity and the love of comrades in the struggle for socialism. Walt Whitman said: ‘I will build great cities with the love of comrades.’ I would go further and say: We will build a great new world.”