

## Contents

List of Illustrations	x
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction SUSAN BELASCO, ED FOLSOM, AND KENNETH M. PRICE	xiii
Abbreviations	xix
1. What We're Still Learning about the 1855 <i>Leaves of Grass</i> 150 Years Later ED FOLSOM	1
 <b>PART 1 : <i>Foregrounding the First Edition</i></b>	
2. Whitman, Marx, and the American 1848 BETSY ERKKILA	35
3. United States and States United: Whitman's National Vision in 1855 M. WYNN THOMAS	62

PART 2 : *Reading the First Edition*

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| 4. “One goodshaped and wellhung man”: Accentuated Sexuality and the Uncertain Authorship of the Frontispiece to the 1855 Edition of <i>Leaves of Grass</i> | 87  |
| TED GENOWAYS   |     |
| 5. Whitman at Night: “The Sleepers” in 1855  | 124 |
| ALAN TRACHTENBERG  |     |
| 6. Complaints from the Spotted Hawk: Flights and Feathers in Whitman’s 1855 <i>Leaves of Grass</i>   | 141 |
| THOMAS C. GANNON   |     |

PART 3 : *Contextualizing the First Edition*

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| 7. <i>Leaves of Grass</i> and the Poetry Marketplace of Antebellum America                  | 179 |
| SUSAN BELASCO   |     |
| 8. <i>Leaves of Grass</i> (1855) and the Cities of Whitman’s Memory                         | 199 |
| WILLIAM PANNAPACKER   |     |
| 9. The Lost Negress of “Song of Myself” and the Jolly Young Wenches of Civil War Washington | 224 |
| KENNETH M. PRICE  |     |
| 10. “Bringing help for the sick”: Whitman and Prophetic Biography                           | 244 |
| VIVIAN R. POLLAK  |     |

PART 4 : *Aftereffects*

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| 11. The Visionary and the Visual in Whitman’s Poetics | 269 |
| M. JIMMIE KILLINGSWORTH                               |     |
| 12. Walt Whitman as an Eminent Victorian              | 282 |
| LAWRENCE BUELL  |     |

13. "To reach the workmen direct": Horace Traubel  
and the Work of the 1855 Edition of *Leaves of Grass*  
MATT COHEN 299
14. "Profession of the calamus": Whitman, Eliot, Matthiessen  
JAY GROSSMAN 321
15. Whitman and the Cold War: The Centenary  
Celebration of *Leaves of Grass* in Eastern Europe  
WALTER GRÜNZWEIG 343

PART 5 : *The Life behind the Book*

16. "A Southerner as soon as a Northerner": Writing  
Walt Whitman's Biography  
JEROME LOVING 363
17. Why I Write Cultural Biography: The Backgrounds  
of *Walt Whitman's America*  
DAVID S. REYNOLDS 378
18. Songs of Myself; or, Confessions of a Whitman  
Collector  
JOEL MYERSON 402

PART 6 : *A Poet Responds*

19. "Strong is your hold": My Encounters with Whitman  
GALWAY KINNEL 417

PART 7 : *The Critical Response*

20. The First *Leaves of Grass*: A Bibliography  
DONALD D. KUMMINGS 429
- Contributors 457
- Index 463

# Introduction

SUSAN BELASCO, ED FOLSOM, & KENNETH M. PRICE

In the spring of 2005 over 150 scholars, musicians, poets, and enthusiasts gathered at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the first publication of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). The Nebraska sesquicentennial celebration followed in the footsteps of numerous *centennial* events — the most notable of which was “Walt Whitman: The Centennial Conference” at the University of Iowa — that occurred just thirteen years earlier, in 1992. Centennial events honored Whitman’s death; sesquicentennial events celebrated the birth of *Leaves of Grass* and, with it, a distinctively new kind of American poetry. Some of the distinguished participants in the Nebraska celebration were also present at the Iowa centennial conference. One of them, James E. Miller Jr., was recognized for career achievements as a Centennial Scholar in 1992 and was honored again in Nebraska as the Sesquicentennial Whitman Scholar in recognition of his groundbreaking work in Whitman studies over the past fifty years. For Miller it was a homecoming: he began his career at the University of Nebraska and published (with Karl Shapiro and Bernice Slotte) the first of his several landmark books on Whitman (the 1960 *Start with the Sun: Essays in the Whitman Tradition*) with the University of Nebraska Press. Since the 1992 centennial conference,

some of our most prominent senior Whitman scholars have passed away, including Gay Wilson Allen, C. Carroll Hollis, and Roger Asselineau. All of us who write about Whitman continue to compost their exceptional insights and use them to help our own work grow. They are missed even as they continue to inform our work and discussions, a debt that is evidenced in many of the essays in this volume.

The daring and grandeur of Whitman's revolutionary book have provoked some extraordinary reactions over the past century and a half. Ralph Waldo Emerson found in it "incomparable things said incomparably well."<sup>1</sup> William Carlos Williams called *Leaves* "a book as important as we are likely to see in the next thousand years."<sup>2</sup> And Lawrence Buell, one of our contributors, judges Whitman's volume to be the "single most original book of poetry ever written in the history of the world."

The daunting challenge that the participants in "Leaves of Grass: The 150th Anniversary Conference" faced — the challenge for anyone writing about Whitman's breakthrough book — was to suitably speak to that level of achievement. The resultant essays gathered in this volume each find a way to meet that challenge, and together they invite us to reopen Whitman's familiar book and see it anew. The essays explore some of the foregrounds to the book, the physical qualities of the book itself, the meanings of those original twelve poems, the contexts for understanding the first edition, and the effects of the book during Whitman's lifetime and beyond. If, as Malcolm Cowley said in 1959, the 1855 *Leaves* is the "buried masterpiece" of American writing,<sup>3</sup> this volume sets out to advance the uncovering and the revivifying of that work.

Ed Folsom's essay, based on his keynote address at the conference, leads off the volume and sets an agenda for rethinking the first edition, offering a number of recent discoveries, and laying out possibilities for future exploration. Following Folsom's piece, Betsy Erkkila and M. Wynn Thomas offer some intriguing new foregrounds for the first edition, Erkkila investigating the surprising convergences between Karl Marx and Whitman, Thomas looking at Whitman's complex love/hate relationship with the forbidding Southern political giant John C. "Crisis" Calhoun. Following this foregrounding are three essays that turn

to the careful reading of particular parts of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*: Ted Genoways examines the famous frontispiece engraving of Whitman in a way that will forever change our sense of what that image means and how it got produced; Alan Trachtenberg offers perhaps the most suggestive reading we've ever had of the poem Whitman would eventually entitle "The Sleepers," tracing the way Whitman descends into the "darker, less scrutable regions of consciousness"; and Thomas C. Gannon explores the ecology of the first edition, especially the remarkable interrelationship between birds and Native Americans in the poem later called "Song of Myself."

Four essays work with promising new ways to contextualize our study of the 1855 edition. Susan Belasco offers an illuminating study of what the poetry publishing scene, both in periodicals and in books, was like when Whitman produced his first volume of poems, and William Pannacker explores the New York and Brooklyn out of which *Leaves* emerged, offering some exciting possibilities for thinking about how the quick pace of urban change during Whitman's lifetime affected his poetry. Kenneth M. Price examines an early, rejected manuscript for the 1855 edition and raises provocative questions about the place of black Americans, particularly black women, in Whitman's work. And Vivian R. Pollak raises new questions about the suggestive ways in which Whitman seeks to be both the poet of health and the poet of sex.

We then turn to five essays that explore a variety of "aftereffects" of the first edition. M. Jimmie Killingsworth provides a new way of reading Whitman's later short poems by tracing how the visionary work of the first edition evolves into the more focused visual work later in the poet's career, while Lawrence Buell examines the surprising transatlantic interconnections among Whitman, Tennyson, and Charles Dickens that develop in the decades following the appearance of the first edition. Matt Cohen examines the tensions between Whitman and his closest disciple, Horace Traubel, as Traubel develops aesthetic and political concerns that diverge from Whitman's views. Jay Grossman opens up a little-studied poem by T. S. Eliot to demonstrate how deep and complex Eliot's interaction with Whitman — a poet for whom Eliot often expressed contempt — actually

was. And Walter Grünfweig moves us to some international after-effects of the first edition as he traces the revealing ways in which Communist Eastern Europe celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the book. Following this group of essays, the two most prominent biographers of Whitman, Jerome Loving and David S. Reynolds, offer inside looks at their experiences writing Whitman's life and their strategies for telling that life effectively, and the preeminent Whitman bibliographer, Joel Myerson, reveals the background story of how he gathered the materials for his magisterial descriptive bibliography of Whitman's works.

We were honored to have at the sesquicentennial conference a poet who was also at the Iowa centennial conference, one of the towering poetic figures of our time, Galway Kinnell. Kinnell has over the years not only responded powerfully to Whitman in his poetry but written eloquently about Whitman in prose as well. We conclude the essays with his spirited response to Whitman, poet talking back to poet. Finally, Donald D. Kummings offers an annotated genealogy of 150 years of commentary on Whitman's first edition, tracking the most significant responses to the 1855 *Leaves*, from the earliest reviews to the most recent criticism.

The essays collected here demonstrate convincingly that, 150 years after the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, we are only now beginning to learn how to read this amazing book. They mark the beginning of a new effort to understand Whitman's most radical volume, and they will, we hope, generate many more in the years to come, as we continue to learn through and from this idiosyncratic little book published in Brooklyn, New York, in 1855.

### *A Note on the Text*

Unless otherwise noted, quotations from *Leaves of Grass* are drawn from *The Walt Whitman Archive* (<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>), ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price. The *Archive* makes easily available all six editions of *Leaves*—now hard to come by in their original form—as page images and searchable e-text. Because ellipses figure prominently in Whitman's work, especially in the 1855 edition of

*Leaves of Grass*, all quotations taken from *Leaves* and Whitman's other writings employ square brackets to distinguish omitted material from Whitman's own ellipses.

### Notes

1. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 10 vols., vols. 1–6, ed. Ralph L. Rusk, vols. 7–10, ed. Eleanor M. Tilton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938–94), 8:446.

2. Williams quoted in Milton Hindus, "The Centenary of *Leaves of Grass*," in *Leaves of Grass: One Hundred Years After*, ed. Milton Hindus (Stanford University Press, 1955), 3.

3. Malcolm Cowley, introduction to *Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition* (New York: Viking, 1959), x.

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LAWRENCE BUELL is the Powell M. Cabot Professor of American Literature at Harvard University. His books include *Literary Transcendentalism*, *New England Literary Culture*, and *Emerson*. Whitman’s transnational contexts—Asian, Latin American, and Victorian—have interested him increasingly in recent years.

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458 : *Contributors*

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460 : *Contributors*

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