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978-0-521-38469-8 - Walt Whitman and the American Reader

Ezra Greenspan

Excerpt

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## I

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*Whitman and the Conditions  
for Authorship in  
Nineteenth-Century America*

Les autres forment l'homme; je le récite et en représente un particulier bien mal formé, et lequel, si j'avais à façonner de nouveau, je ferais vraiment bien autre qu'il n'est . . .

Je propose une vie basse et sans lustre, c'est tout un. On attache aussi bien toute la philosophie morale à une vie populaire et privée qu'à une vie de plus riche étoffe; chaque homme porte la forme entière de l'humaine condition.

Les auteurs se communiquent au peuple par quelque marque particulière et étrangère; moi, le premier, par mon être universel, comme Michel de Montaigne, non comme grammairien, ou poète, ou jurisconsulte. Si le monde se plaint de quoi je parle trop de moi, je me plains de quoi il ne pense seulement pas à soi.

Montaigne, "Du Repentir"

Books and the Man I sing.

Pope, *The Dunciad*

Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all; – so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.

Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

. . . an outline is the best, –

A lively reader's fancy does the rest.

Byron, *Don Juan*

I find certain books vital and spermatic, not leaving the reader what he was.

Emerson, *Society and Solitude*

. . . in this country who does not read?

Whitman, *Brooklyn Eagle*

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*Homage to the Tenth Muse*

On the evening of September 27, 1855, New York's Crystal Palace played host to nineteenth-century America's greatest gathering of literary talent and achievement. Organized by the recently formed New York Publishers' Association and timed to follow its extensive trade sale of the previous week, the "Complimentary Fruit and Floral Festival to Authors" was designed to celebrate the accomplishments of the partners in the creation of American literary culture: American writers, publishers, and their reading public. The setting chosen for the evening, the imposing glass- and iron-domed pavilion built behind Croton Reservoir for the New York World's Fair of 1853, the first hosted in the Americas, was itself a national symbol of pride, of a nation self-consciously on the rise and able to match the accomplishments of Europe.

The 650 invited guests entered upon an impressive scene. The vast expanse of the building was sectioned off for the occasion at its northern nave by a red, white, and blue partition and illuminated by octagonal gaslights. Before the nave was set a raised dais with a long table reserved for the president of the Publishers' Association, the invited speakers, and various dignitaries. The table was decorated with statues of the Graces, and a statue of Gutenberg and his press was positioned opposite the president's place. Perpendicular to the dais ran six long, parallel tables extending the full length of the enclosure, the two on the flanks reserved for authors and the interior ones primarily for members of the Publishers' Association. Galleries for spectators, filled primarily by women, rose up behind and to the sides of the speaker's dais, the northern gallery holding the orchestra and illuminated by gaslights arranged so as to depict a statue of Clio in the temple of wisdom crowned with lights spelling out "Honor to Genius." Beneath the galleries hung portraits of the pioneer publishers Mathew Carey and Daniel Appleton. A huge cornucopia garlanded with flowers and flowing fruit juices was symbolically positioned in the center of the nave.

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But the most impressive element of the evening was the human assemblage, the visible proof to those in attendance of one of the central developments of their lives: the proliferation of American literary, journalistic, educational, and scientific talent and of the publishing industry which had grown up to publicize it. Among the dozens of well-known writers in attendance were William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving, Fitz-Greene Halleck, Nathaniel Parker Willis, Henry Ward Beecher, John Pendleton Kennedy, Timothy Shay Arthur, Bayard Taylor, Henry Tuckerman, Cornelius Mathews, Evert and George Duyckinck, Lewis Gaylord Clark, Charles Briggs, Seba Smith, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Rufus Griswold, Henry William Herbert, Henry Barnard, Richard Grant White, Park Benjamin, Henry Carey, Henry Schoolcraft, Frederick Law Olmsted, James and Sara ("Fanny Fern") Parton, Samuel Goodrich, Horace Bushnell, Adam Gurowski, Caroline Gilman, Maria McIntosh, Catherine Beecher, Lydia Maria Child, Lydia Sigourney, Alice and Phoebe Cary, Caroline Kirkland, and Susan Warner. Among the more prominent of the American publishing houses represented were Harper's, Appleton's, Putnam's, Mason's, Little, Brown and Company, and Ticknor and Fields. The mayors of the three major publishing centers of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston were all present, as were the presidents of Columbia, Yale, and Girard colleges. Well publicized in advance, the dinner also attracted a large press delegation, including reporters from most of the major New York City newspapers. Letters from writers unable to attend, some read on the spot and others printed the next day in the papers, were sent by Emerson, Melville, Holmes, Longfellow, Whittier, Dana, Sumner, Everett, Prescott, Sparks, Palfrey, Whipple, Mann, Ripley, Curtis, Anthon, the Stowes, Tappan, and Agassiz. Hawthorne, who would otherwise have been invited, was American consul at Liverpool. Thoreau, uninvited and uninterested, was at Concord. Whitman was probably several miles away in Brooklyn.<sup>1</sup>

The evening began with a multicourse meal consisting of assorted cold meats, fruits, salads, creams, and pastries (the last shaped as geographical places – not what Whitman had had in mind several months earlier when he advised the American poet to "incarnate" his country). William Appleton, as president of the Publishers' Association, then opened the long series of speeches and toasts by greeting the guests at the entrance to "a new era in the history" of publishing and by delivering an exhortation to his colleagues on the moral responsibilities of their profession:

I surely need not remind those who are now within reach of the sound of my voice that it very often depends upon the decision of the book-seller whether a new work shall or shall not be published. If we, brethren, can cordially unite in a determination that no book of a questionable

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moral tendency, or of a useless or pernicious character in any point of view, shall receive our imprint, we have done more for our country than a dozen societies for the suppression of vice and immorality can ever do. If, on the other hand, we are always ready to take some risk in order to enable genius, guided by virtue and sanctified by religion, to struggle into the sunshine of public favor, we shall lend still more important aid to our country's glory and happiness.<sup>2</sup>

His own firm, though well known for its conservatism, was soon to become the American publisher of Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

Appleton was followed by George Palmer Putnam, secretary of the Publishers' Association and one of the seminal figures in the institutionalization of publishing in America. For more than a decade, Putnam had been the most articulate voice among American publishers in calling for the promotion of American literature. He had led a generally reluctant industry in supporting the cause of international copyright for American authors, had set an industry precedent by taking an author – Washington Irving – in hand and according him the privileged treatment reserved for “standard” authors, had publicized American achievements to a skeptical world – working particularly hard to open the British market to American books – and had established an in-house monthly magazine (*Putnam's Monthly*) in 1853, which quickly became, as had been his intention from the start, the leading periodical publisher of American talent of its time.<sup>3</sup> His own firm, in fact, had taken a large – and, as it turned out, losing – risk in publishing the official catalogue of the Crystal Palace. So when Putnam was asked to address the current state of American letters, he could speak with authority unrivaled among American publishers.

Putnam began, amidst the atmosphere of good feelings, by emphasizing the salutary features in author-publisher relations in America, a theme repeated through the night: “The interests of writers, publishers and sellers of books are daily growing in magnitude and importance, and these interests are and should be mutual and identical.”<sup>4</sup> He then turned to his main theme, well suited to the occasion: the extraordinary advances made by American literary culture in all its aspects during the past generation. He noted with pride the rapid expansion of population and the even more rapid expansion of book and magazine circulation, the increase in native as opposed to foreign authorship of books printed in America, and the enlarged size of editions necessitated by the growing demand for books and periodicals. Citing the deprecating remark of the Scottish historian Archibald Alison that “the literature and intellectual ability of the highest class meet but little encouragement in America,” Putnam proceeded to recite at length the already familiar midcentury litany of American achievements in the various fields of learning, listing

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names and compiling statistics as he went. Although he did not draw out the far-reaching implications of his vision, Putnam sketched out for his audience a scene of a new era in publishing and literature:

Think of eighteen thousand double, or thirty-six thousand single reams of paper, required yearly for a single magazine, which courses over the country, unprecedented in cheapness and attraction, at the rate of one hundred and fifty thousand per month. The wildest imaginings, at home or abroad, twenty years ago, would not have stretched so far as this. Why, Sir, the sheets from our book-presses alone, in a single year, would reach nearly twice around the globe; and if we add the periodicals and newspapers, the issues of our presses in about eighteen months would make a belt, two feet wide, printed on both sides, which would stretch from New-York to the Moon! In the *machinery* for this great manufacture, our artisans, I will venture to say, are not yet excelled, if equaled, elsewhere. The printing-presses of Hoe and of Adams are said to surpass any used in Europe. The important art of stereotyping, which there is reason to believe originated in this country, has certainly been brought to greater perfection here than it has reached abroad – and naturally so; for our wide market requires this permanent form, for nearly all we print. And by a recent beautiful invention of another of those citizens, whom we are proud to “adopt” and “develope,” the types themselves are set up by steam, aided by rapid girlish fingers, touching keys like those of a piano, and sliding words of thought into “form” about four times as fast as the quickest compositor.

Putnam’s remarks, as one might expect, were enthusiastically received; and so it went through the long night of self-congratulation, as speaker after speaker – author, publisher, minister, politician – offered his tribute to things American. The Reverend E. H. Chapin gave one of the best-received speeches of the night in praising the power of the printing press in “the age of steam and electricity.” Henry Tappan sent a letter in which he noted: “Nothing characterizes our age more strongly than the immense number of books which are written, printed, and scattered abroad. The power of steam is invoked to move the press, and the manufactories of books stately and imposing rival the manufactories of the useful commodities. Booksellers carry on their trade in splendid palaces.”<sup>5</sup> Emerson joined the chorus of praise in expressing his sentiment by mail that “the friendliest meeting of the authors and publishers of good books I must think one of the fairest omens for mankind.”<sup>6</sup>

In one of the best received performances of the night, the publisher-turned-poet-for-the-occasion, James Fields, read a poem in which he praised the publishing ways of the present at the expense of those of the past:

How slow and sure they set their types,  
How small editions ran!

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Then fifty thousand never sold –  
 Before the sale began.  
 For how could they, poor plodding souls,  
 Be either swift or wise,  
 Who never learned the mighty art  
 Of *how* to advertise.<sup>7</sup>

William Cullen Bryant, who was called on to respond to a toast of American literature, ignored his own previous troubled dealings with publishers in denying the truism that “booksellers are the natural enemies of the authors”: “But I deny the antagonism; and I do not agree with those who complain of booksellers becoming rich. If the bookseller be not enriched, how can he give liberal terms to authors? and when I hear of rich booksellers, I also remember that there have been well-paid authors.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most interesting observation of the night was one attributed by a reporter to Henry Ward Beecher: “He had been looking about to see if he could tell authors by their looks, but he could not find any indications by which he could distinguish authors from publishers, and they all looked remarkably like other people.”<sup>9</sup> On that night, at least, he was probably right.

One man who would certainly have deviated from that pattern, uninvited but no longer completely unknown – the current issue of *Putnam’s* was running a slightly bedazzled but generally appreciative review of *Leaves of Grass* – was Walt Whitman, poet and self-publisher.<sup>10</sup> *Leaves of Grass* had almost certainly been offered by his distributor, Fowler and Wells, at the publishers’ giant trade sale of the previous week, its price having been halved from the original two dollars to coincide with the sale; but it is not likely that there had been much, if any, demand for it. Whitman, it is well known, had keen ambitions for the national distribution and acceptance of his first volume of poetry and was doing everything possible, even resorting to promoting it in eulogistic self-reviews, in order to advance his ambition. One therefore wonders how he reacted to the highly publicized events of September 27, what feelings and thoughts he had as the literary establishment gathered across the river to celebrate itself en masse.

He would certainly have been among the first to appreciate the scene of the occasion. Always drawn to a good spectacle, Whitman had been an early devotee of the Crystal Palace. He visited it early and often – “I went a long time (nearly a year) – days and nights – especially the latter” – and kept up his fascination with it and its exhibitions until its destruction by fire in 1858, which he noted sadly in the newspaper he was then editing.<sup>11</sup> It stood out, to his eyes, from other buildings in New York as “an edifice certainly unsurpassed any where for beauty and all the other requisites of a perfect edifice,” “an original, esthetic, perfectly

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proportioned, American edifice."<sup>12</sup> He probably read and would certainly have shared in the view of the *American Phrenological Journal* (in which he had an article the following month), which saw the Palace as presiding over an idyllic harmony of interests:

There will be gathered here the choicest products of the luxury of the Old World, and the most cunning devices of the ingenuity of the New. The interests of Manufacture, Commerce, and the Arts, will all find encouragement and protection within these walls, and another guarantee will be given to the permanence of peace. Here will be collected multitudes of all nations; but the great and crowning feature of the enterprise is, that it will offer amusement and recreation to the working classes, such as they can find no where else; that it will be a *Palace For The People*.<sup>13</sup>

Whitman's attraction to the Palace was visceral; parts of several of his 1855 poems, such as "A Song for Occupations," might but for their idiosyncrasies be read as tributes to the Palace's "Exposition of the Industry of the Nations." In making poetry of "the cylinder press . . the handpress . . the frisket and tympan . . the compositor's stick and rule," Whitman was in effect touching the precise point of intersection between the Crystal Palace, its exhibitions, and the publishers-authors dinner.

One can easily find his or her ironies in the matter, Whitman's absence – he would later think of such things rather as "exclusion" – not only from the dinner but from the author-publisher relationship, a crucial connection if he was to reach the American public; and his nonpareil devotion to the ideal of a national literature, itself an underlying reason for the dinner and its main toast, matched by his open contempt for the forms of the dinner and for the forms and conventions of the literary establishment. But to appreciate the full significance of the scenario I am drawing, one must step back and view from the proper perspective the long foreground of events leading up to the curious situation of Whitman and his poetry in 1855.

As he grew older, Whitman liked to glance backward on his life and identify it on the grand scale with the events of the nineteenth century. In one of his most carefully and "authoritatively" considered pronouncements of later years, he would remember his overarching ambition in writing *Leaves of Grass* as having been "to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America – and to exploit that Personality, identified with place and date, in a far more candid and comprehensive sense than any hitherto



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poem or book.”<sup>14</sup> The officiousness of his old-age views notwithstanding, Whitman had solid justification for this claim; no American writer had ever been able to lay hold to as much of the continent as had Whitman. Of course, this is not to say that Whitman was particularly successful in convincing his contemporaries that his ideas of art and “personality” were theirs. But whatever the discrepancy between his own sense of mission and his reception by the contemporaneous reading public, a subject to be taken up in due course, I do believe that Whitman’s claim for the superimposition of himself and his book on America is to be taken seriously. In the first part of this study, I will be making my own “tally” between Whitman and America, exploring the connection between Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and the bookmaking culture of his society and the more general connection between his career and the conditions for authorship in midnineteenth-century America.

Whitman came to maturity during a period of great ferment in American history, as he and his contemporaries were keenly aware. His early years coincided with what contemporaries widely interpreted as the greatest explosion of energies – technological, demographic, economic, and cultural – since Renaissance times. Nowhere in the Western world was the impact of the released forces more powerful than on its western flank, where what had taken centuries to transpire in Europe was compressed into several generations: the conquest of a continent; the growth of cities; the establishment of modern systems of transportation, commerce, and education; the self-conscious construction of a culture. Having no model or precedent by which to evaluate such rapid historical change, men and women of Whitman’s era reacted in widely various ways to the developments taking place about them. Where a slightly later figure than Whitman would react with fear and anxiety and uncomfortably symbolize the new era with its accelerating pace and unpredictable direction by the figure of the dynamo, Whitman was generally inclined to see his emerging society and world with confidence and satisfaction.

Never one to overvalue the past, Whitman was given to moments when he genuinely believed himself and his countrymen to be living in an age apart: “Think of the absence and ignorance, in all cases hitherto, of the multitudinousness, vitality, and the unprecedented stimulants of to-day and here. It almost seems as if a poetry with cosmic and dynamic features of magnitude and limitlessness suitable to the human soul, were never possible before.”<sup>15</sup> Thrilling to the recent achievements of the magnetic telegraph, photography, steamships, and railroads, he conscientiously worked the wonders of modern technology into his poetry: “See! steamers steaming through my poems!... / See, the many-cylinder’d steam printing-press – See, the electric telegraph – See, the



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strong and quick locomotive, as it departs, panting, blowing the steam whistle" ("Starting from Paumanok"). On the occasion of his seventieth birthday, he received a strangely appropriate letter from Mark Twain, who without really knowing him identified him with the technological advances of the age:

You have lived just the seventy years which are greatest in the world's history, and richest in benefit and advancement to its peoples. These seventy years have done much more to widen the interval between men and the other animals than was accomplished by any five centuries which preceded them.

What great births you have witnessed! The steam-press, the steam-ship, the steel-ship, the railroad, the perfected cotton-gin, the telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the photograph, the photogravure, the electrotpe, the gaslight, the electric light, the sewing machine . . . Yes, you have indeed seen much; but tarry yet awhile, for the greatest is yet to come.<sup>16</sup>

From among the tens of inventions Twain listed in his letter, the most fitting technological symbol for Whitman – indeed, for nineteenth-century literary culture in general – was one with which Whitman had an insider's familiarity and a lifetime of acquaintance: the modernized printing press. We of the twentieth century so take for granted the means of production of our literary culture that we do not easily grasp how much closer a literary culture, such as that of the nineteenth century, was to the machines which made possible its production and distribution, nor do we readily understand how considerably the presence of the new technology affected the culture which issued through it.

Compared to previous times, the nineteenth century was the age of the printing press; and to judge from its newspapers and magazines, it knew it. In the largest sense, the early nineteenth century in Europe and America was witnessing an outright revolution in printing and its related industries, as the knowledge and methods of the Industrial Revolution were applied to the written word. The printing press, not significantly improved since the time of Gutenberg, underwent rapid, extensive modification over the course of the century. Iron replaced wood; manual power gave way briefly to horsepower, then to steam power. The traditional principle of flatbed impressions was gradually superseded by the concept of rotating cylinders, which, as they increased in number, produced a geometrical expansion of printing capacity over that of the antiquated presses. As a result of the many and various improvements in their technology and design, presses grew rapidly during the century in size, capacity, and sophistication. To give an example of how dramatically press technology was changing, the largest of the new presses put into service in the midnineteenth century, the Hoe 10-cylinder rotary

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press used by some of the biggest newspaper publishers in the United States and England, was itself as large as was a building capable of housing a printing office of the cottage-industry era.

At the same time, corresponding developments were transforming other printing-related industries. The utilization of stereotyping and electroplating became the commonly accepted practice of American publishers by midcentury, providing them with a cheaper and more efficient alternative to printing from type. Both authors and publishers, not to mention the reading public, benefited from the resultant ability to print additional editions of works with a minimum of additional expense, making possible wider markets, larger sales, larger profits, and expanded reputations. Likewise, the production of paper, long a slow and costly procedure performed by hand, became mechanized by the turn of the century, with the output of paper increasing exponentially. Meanwhile, the search for materials more plentiful and reliable than rags for the production of paper continued through the century, culminating in the use of wood pulp and helping to make the productive potentiality of the giant presses a reality.

It was for contemporaries a dazzling display of technological and industrial advances, and one of the most impressive of its characteristics was the rapidity with which it developed. A grown person at midcentury might have seen much of this development transpire within his or her lifetime – a striking case in point being Whitman. When he first went out in 1831 as an apprentice to a local printer in the village of Brooklyn, he was trained at the shop's simple wooden handpress, which was all that a local newspaper of the time would have needed (it was all Whitman needed when he established his own country newspaper on Long Island seven years later). During the next several years of his apprenticeship, he trained at the more sophisticated Rust press used in the shop of a rival Brooklyn newspaper. By the time he returned to the area in 1841 after the lapse of a half dozen years to work in the bustling printing shop of Park Benjamin's *New World*, he entered the new world of press technology, working at the new Napier cylinder presses needed to print the paper and later its popular series of "Books for the People" – the people in this case warranting editions of ten to twenty thousand copies.

Five years later, when he was in control of the Brooklyn *Eagle*, he proudly introduced to his readers in the accepted manner of the day the paper's new Napier press – "about as pretty and clean-working a piece of machinery as a man might wish to look on, (with all the 'latest improvements')" – which was to give him access to the reading community of Brooklyn and Long Island.<sup>17</sup> A decade later, he was able to announce with pride the imminent acquisition by his most recent newspaper of a double-cylinder steam press capable of turning out five thou-