

# SIXTY-EIGHT PREVIOUSLY UNCOLLECTED REVIEWS OF WALT WHITMAN

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THE STORY OF WALT WHITMAN'S RECEPTION HISTORY grows more fascinating as additional documents gradually come to light. We have listed here all reviews identified since the publication of *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews* (1996), edited by Kenneth M. Price, including a handful that have been posted on the *Walt Whitman Archive* in the meantime. In the following pages, we reproduce in full or in part those reviews that seem to us most illuminating. (All of the listed new reviews will be made available in their entirety on the *Whitman Archive* shortly after publication in the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*.) The reviews collected here span the entire range of Whitman's writing career, from his temperance novel *Franklin Evans* (1842) to the so-called deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1891-1892), and they address every edition of *Leaves* as well as "A Child's Reminiscence," *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free*, *Two Rivulets*, *Memoranda During the War*, *November Boughs*, *Specimen Days & Collect*, *Good-Bye My Fancy*, William Michael Rossetti's 1868 British edition (*Poems by Walt Whitman*), and Ernest Rhys's 1886 British edition (*Leaves of Grass: The Poems of Walt Whitman*). These reviews also represent the views of critics on both sides of the Atlantic (and include Irish and Scottish perspectives).

Whitman's long-term critical reception has its roots in the reviews that were published during his lifetime. Many of the same ideas and themes that emerged in other previously collected contemporary reviews—as well as in the critical debates that continued after Whitman's death—are evident in the reviews collected here. For example, many of the American reviews tended to take an extreme view, either proclaiming Whitman to be the American Homer or Shakespeare or condemning him for being obscene and vulgar. In an early 1860 review, "Umos" unequivocally declares that Whitman's work is *not* poetry: "My private opinion expressed to you confidentially is, that Whitman found a lot of dictionary-*pi* going on at auction, bought it for a song, employed a Chinese type-setter from the Bible House to set it up in lines of unequal length, and then sold it to you as an original Poem." Reviewers attacked both the form and content of *Leaves of Grass*. "A more scandalous volume we never saw," declares *The Springfield Daily Republican* in June of 1860. "It ought to be enough for Walt Whitman, if

he honestly thinks his book a pure one, to know that the pure in society will shun it, and that it will be sought out and laughed over by lewd women and prurient boys and hoary-headed old lechers,—to know that this notice of his volume will stir to read it only the dregs of the social and moral world into which it goes.”

Two decades later, in 1882, Elmina, in her column “Suggestions and Advice to Mothers,” rapturously declares the “innate worth and purity” of Whitman’s work. “Take, O mothers, a page of Walt Whitman for your morning prayer, and you will begin the day with strong, pure aspirations, and a heart attuned to all that is good, true and beautiful—all that is vigorous, natural and elevating,” she writes, concluding, “Grander and purer than all Bibles—a book that shall make lovely women and stalwart men, and sweet, happy, healthful babes.” This radically different view does not, however, indicate a general shift in reviewers’ responses to Whitman. In the same year, *The Atlantic Monthly* finds Whitman breaking “one of the deepest and finest of natural laws; and instead of making the body sacred, he despoils it of the sacredness which mankind now generally accords to it. He degrades body and soul by a brutish wallowing in animal matter as animal matter, deprived of its spiritual attributes.”

Extreme statements are characteristic of the reviews spanning Whitman’s entire poetic career. Many reviewers saw him as a trailblazing visionary whose work would be truly appreciated only by future generations. In 1881, *The Springfield Daily Republican* placed Whitman in the company of two other contemporary visionaries: “John Brown, Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman,—men unlike each other and unlike all others.” It went on to praise “Whitman’s teeming and unharvested imagination.” That same year, the *Saint Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press* also identified Whitman’s visionary quality: “He is, indeed a poet who sees far and keenly; and no doubt the reader of the future will believe it still more than we.”

Many reviewers connected Whitman’s outlook with his deep-rooted sense of being an *American* poet. In 1881, the *Boston Globe* proclaimed: “Walt Whitman has written the drama—it may be almost called the history—of the first century of American civilization.” A month later, *The Worthington Advance* explored the idea of Whitman as an American poet at greater length:

He has laid the foundations, started the idea, of a genuine Democratic, New World, thoroughly American literature, and after him will come some great poet who will be the Shakspeare to this Chaucer. . . . Longfellow, Bryant, Whittier, Lowell and the rest will be remembered in the Cyclopedias as poets who did creditable work in *English* literature, but Whitman and his class will loom over the future as the founders and makers of an *American* literature.

The linking of Whitman with a distinctively American poetry and vision and with an idea of democracy that often verges on the spiritual are ideas that would shape scholarship for decades after Whitman's death.

A number of the reviews presented here exhibit a more moderate, mixed reaction to Whitman's work. Some reviewers found flashes of brilliance amongst the poet's otherwise incoherent and chaotic work. In May of 1860, for example, the *Albion* discovered "a slender thread of truth and purity" in *Leaves of Grass*:

As to these 'Leaves of Grass,' nine-tenths of them are covered with words that have no more meaning, coherency, or perceptible purpose than the columns in a spelling-book; while the indecency—an indecency not born of prurience, but of the absolute refusal to recognize such a distinction as decent and indecent—is monstrous beyond precedent, and were it not before our eyes, beyond belief. Yet for the one-tenth that we have excepted we shall keep the book, and read it, not without a strange interest in the man who could draw such a slender thread of truth and purity through such a confused mass of folly, feculence, and falsehood.

Three months later, the *National Quarterly Review* reiterated this mixed appraisal of Whitman: "The author seems to exult in being as indecent, obscene, and profane as possible. This is the more to be regretted, because, in the midst of a great deal of the silliest twaddle, and the most unmeaning bombast, we find thought of rare beauty and striking force, wonderful felicity of expression, and imagery at once boldest and most pleasing." This view of Whitman's work continued throughout his career; in the early 1880s, the reviewer for the *Detroit Post and Tribune* calls *Leaves* "a flood of incoherent and incohesive language" in which one might find "flotsam jewels" amid "the rubbish." In a similar vein, a reviewer in the January 22, 1882 issue of the *New York Times* finds that "Whitman's work is like a rich garden" in which "flower and weed are . . . inextricably blended."

Some reviewers emphasized how the Civil War shaped Whitman's poetic vision and work. In November of 1881, *The Springfield Sunday Republican*, in reviewing the most recent edition of *Leaves of Grass*, made an inaccurate assessment of the book's likelihood of being "prohibited" (it was found to be obscene in March of 1882 in Boston and temporarily banned from the mails) but also an intriguing observation about the way the War shaped Whitman's poetry:

[T]his book will be received, we fancy, as none of Whitman's former books have been. It will no longer be a work prohibited, but, in spite of many passages which must always keep it from a familiar place on the table, and from the perfect liberty of unformed judgments,—it will find its way into all good libraries and into many homes. For the civil war made Whitman a domestic poet, which he had hardly been before. The clear recognition and pathetic portrayal of the home affection in the Americans, not less than their patriotism and devotion to democracy, give "Drum Taps" an affectionate place in the hearts of his readers.

These reviews, in addition to clarifying Whitman's reception in the U.S., also shed light on intriguing Anglo-American literary exchanges. Whitman was the first to provoke these exchanges with his early self-review "A British and an American Poet," in which he aligned himself with American democracy in opposition to Tennyson, a poet who, he alleged, embodied the aristocracy of the British tradition. Whitman's self-representation as the American poet of democracy crucially informed his British reception, which, when it was favorable, often categorized Whitman's boldness and formal innovation as peculiarly American and celebrated his democratic agenda.

In the beginning, Whitman was noticed primarily in British periodicals sympathetic to democracy: the mainstream, utilitarian *Westminster Review* offered some extracts from the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* (without comment, but also without condemnation) and the radical journal *The Leader* ran a positive review of the same volume by George Henry Lewes, a bohemian cohabitating with the *Westminster* reviewer, George Eliot. In the late 1860s, Whitman's work was promoted by a number of liberal poet-critics whose own aesthetic leaned towards the counter-cultural: William Michael Rossetti, Robert Buchanan, and Algernon Swinburne.<sup>1</sup> In 1868, Rossetti edited a British edition of Whitman's poems, which generated respectful and mostly positive responses from British reviewers. All this is well documented by previous reviews; what the British reviews collected here provide is a fuller account of the role of the British avant-garde in promoting Whitman's work and provoking the transatlantic conversation that helped develop his reputation.

Two reviews republished here, the notice in *Dublin Review* in 1874 and a hostile review by Peter Bayne a year later, document the extent to which serious consideration of Whitman's verse depended on the work of these early avant-garde critics. While in 1855 the *Dublin Review* had published a negative appraisal of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, by 1874 this same journal had become slightly more accepting. Despite lamenting Whitman's alienation from the Catholic Church, the reviewer recognizes "in his talents a gift of the Most High, and in his writings much that is beautiful and precious in the midst of much that is dangerous and base." Meanwhile, Peter Bayne, in the *Contemporary Review*, a highbrow liberal periodical, took twenty pages to excoriate his verse. Bayne writes,

If I ever saw anything in print that deserved to be characterized as atrociously bad, it is the poetry of Walt Whitman; and the three critics of repute, Dr. [Edward] Dowden, Mr. W. Rossetti, and Mr. Buchanan, who have praised his performances, appear to me to be playing off on the public a well-intentioned, probably good-humoured, but really cruel hoax.

These “critics of repute” are mentioned on almost every other page throughout the review. It is clear that what incenses Bayne is not Whitman’s poetry itself, but the seriousness with which it is treated by respectable British critics. (This may be partially an effort to hold his peers accountable for their judgments since Bayne also takes the opportunity to correct Swinburne’s representation of his position on a completely separate matter.) Bayne ends his review,

As a Yankee phenomenon, to be good-humouredly laughed at, and to receive that moderate pecuniary remuneration which nature allows to vivacious quacks, he would have been in his place; but when influential critics introduce him to the English public as a great poet, the thing becomes too serious for a joke.

Bayne’s review is of interest, not only because it suggests that Whitman had already gained a place on the British literary scene, but also because it is one of the few thoughtful negative reviews of the poet’s work. Bayne certainly does not pull any punches, but he also judges Whitman as much by aesthetic as by moral criteria. Of course Bayne’s serious treatment testifies (despite his protests) that Whitman had already arrived, a fact that the *Dublin Review*’s more temperate response also acknowledges. In fact the New York correspondent for the *London Daily Times* begins his review by claiming that Whitman enjoys a reputation in England that he does not at home: “it can hardly be said that his claims to the rank of poet were seriously considered in America until they had been discussed by Mr. W. M. Rosetti [sic], Mr. Robert Buchanan, and other authorities in London.” Statements like these show how much Whitman’s reputation, even after the Civil War, depended on the prominence of his advocates’ names.

The reviews also suggest that Whitman’s reputation grew largely as a result of the mutual interest British and American critics had in each other’s judgments. Not only did American periodicals frequently reprint British reviews (like the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*’s reprint of and addendum to a *Westminster Review* article), the reviewers often began by situating their opinions in relation to “transatlantic” critics.<sup>2</sup> John Hollingshead in the *Irish Literary Gazette* published in February 1861 the only known review of Whitman to appear that year, and one of the earliest notices of Whitman in Ireland, attending to Whitman as Emerson’s “monster” offspring. Likewise, the *Sunday Times* review quotes John Burroughs’s biography. The *Worthington Advance* reviewer writes, “Whitman has steadily grown in favor in Europe and hence his own countrymen have taken him up and have gradually come to see that a great and original poet has been among them.” The reviewer also tracks the intricacies of a transatlantic conversation that took place twenty years previously, when the *Cincinnati Commercial* reprinted and

commented on a *Westminster Review* article, which *The Fireside* then responded to.<sup>3</sup> These reviews give a sense of a broader conversation among the community of readers and writers.

Finally, these reviews also enrich our understanding of the British cultural scene. Whitman's poetic reception sheds light on the emergence of an avant-garde and a new divide between serious and popular poetry in Britain. Swinburne, Rossetti, and Buchanan all occasionally or regularly pushed the boundaries of socially acceptable content, and all identified with radical political agendas. As the *Dublin* reviewer writes,

Mr. William Michael Rossetti was principally concerned in introducing [Whitman's] works into the English market; and when it is remembered that Mr. Rossetti is the bosom friend of Swinburne, our readers will not be surprised to hear that Walt Whitman, as an author, is the embodiment of all that is most opposed to the Catholic religion.

But the *Sunday Times* review, which predates the important notices by Swinburne, Rossetti, and Buchanan, suggests that Whitman himself provoked a new kind of scholarly attention. Contrary to most mid-century Victorian reviews, however, while it admits that “[the volume's] contents are such as cannot possibly be admitted into family reading,” it nevertheless also contends that the volume is “such as a man of culture will not care entirely to ignore.” These comments suggest that the British Whitman might have gained his prestige as an avant-garde rather than as a populist poet. The divide between material appropriate for “family” reading and that which can only be consumed by an adult male audience was well established. The latter always implicitly contained the cachet of sexual knowledge, but rarely was it publicly valorized.<sup>4</sup> Instead, most mid-century reviewers advocated popularity and widespread appeal as the true test of artistic merit. Therefore, while almost all reviews address Whitman's “indecent,” favorable reviews generally respond to it by arguing that Whitman's treatment renders the indecorous content “healthy” (that which is not, after all, really indecent) or that the indecency forms only a small, regrettable part of his total oeuvre.<sup>5</sup> The *Sunday Times*, in contrast, does not indicate that indecent content threatens the poetry's worth. The “man of culture” is marked as one who can consume counter-cultural artistic productions that are nevertheless high art. Add to this the alleged “scarcity” of the 1860 *Leaves* and its high price in the British market, and the sense of an avant-garde becomes more sharply focused. If Whitman's reputation depended partially on his introduction by “critics of repute,” the *Sunday Times* review bolsters evidence from previous reviews about

how these critics in turn used Whitman to help define an aesthetic built around novelty (Whitman's formal innovations) and an adult male audience that prefigured the culture of modernism.

## NOTES

1 Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866) was almost uniformly condemned by the British press for its sexually explicit material. William Michael Rossetti was known and widely respected as a critic, but he was also associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, whose sensual art provoked Robert Buchanan's infamous attack in "The Fleshly School of Poetry" (1871). Buchanan himself had been criticized for drawing the subjects of his poetry from the lower class and writing about prostitutes. Although Buchanan and Swinburne were bitter enemies, they had much more than Whitman in common; they also shared an intemperate reviewing style, a commitment to democratic politics, a love of satire (including self-parody), and a tendency to write at the edge of what was socially acceptable.

2 The information we have about reprints is still incomplete, but nevertheless suggestive. The *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* (November 29, 1860) reprinted a *Westminster Review* article (January 10, 1860); the New York *Saturday Press* reprinted an article from the *Leader* (June 30, 1860); *Littell's Living Age* reprinted several British reviews: *London Review* (March 21, 1868), the *Saturday Review* (May 2, 1868), and Peter Bayne's *Contemporary Review* article (December 1875). The *New York Daily Tribune* (June 25, 1867) reprinted an article from the *London Review* (June 8, 1867).

3 As we compiled these new reviews, the number kept growing because writers so often refer to other reviews or previous articles on Whitman in their own periodicals. Newly available searchable electronic databases also helped in the discovery of materials, as did the traditional method of digging ever deeper into archives and special collections around the country as work continues on the *Whitman Archive*.

4 In this respect, one other comment by the *Sunday Times* reviewer is relevant. After listing Whitman's central ideas, the reviewer adds, "Lastly comes the notion of comradeship. This last we only partially understand, and are not in the least tempted to enter upon."

5 See, for example, the characteristic statement of the *Pioneer Press*: "But it must be said of [Whitman's indecency], as he says of his poems, that the words are nothing, the tendency everything. His lines are bold and startling, but you can look them through and through and find no prurient suggestiveness."