

DOVER · THRIFT · EDITIONS

# Leaves *of* Grass

THE ORIGINAL 1855 EDITION

A black and white portrait of Walt Whitman, an older man with a long, full white beard and mustache, wearing a dark wide-brimmed hat and a dark coat. He is looking slightly to the right with a gentle expression. The background is dark and textured.

WALT WHITMAN



AMERICA does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions . . . accepts the lesson with calmness . . . is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms . . . perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house . . . perceives that it waits a little while in the door . . . that it was fittest for its days . . . that its action has descended to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who approaches . . . and that he shall be fittest for his days.

The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes. . . . Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves. Here the performance disdaining the trivial unapproached in the tremendous audacity of its crowds and groupings and the push of its perspective spreads with crampless and flowing breadth and showers its prolific and splendid extravagance. One sees it must indeed own the riches of the summer and winter, and need never be bankrupt while corn grows from the ground or the orchards drop apples or the bays contain fish or men beget children upon women.

Other states indicate themselves in their deputies . . . but the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colléges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors . . . but always most in the common people. Their manners speech dress friendships—the freshness and candor of their physiognomy—the picturesque looseness of



their carriage . . . their deathless attachment to freedom—their aversion to anything indecorous or soft or mean—the practical acknowledgment of the citizens of one state by the citizens of all other states—the fierceness of their roused resentment—their curiosity and welcome of novelty—their self-esteem and wonderful sympathy—their susceptibility to a slight—the air they have of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors—the fluency of their speech—their delight in music, the sure symptom of manly tenderness and native elegance of soul . . . their good temper and openhandedness—the terrible significance of their elections—the President's taking off his hat to them not they to him—these too are unrhymed poetry. It awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it.

The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen. Not nature nor swarming states nor streets and steamships nor prosperous business nor farms nor capital nor learning may suffice for the ideal of man . . . nor suffice the poet. No reminiscences may suffice either. A live nation can always cut a deep mark and can have the best authority the cheapest . . . namely from its own soul. This is the sum of the profitable uses of individuals or states and of present action and grandeur and of the subjects of poets.—As if it were necessary to trot back generation after generation to the eastern records! As if the beauty and sacredness of the demonstrable must fall behind that of the mythical! As if men do not make their mark out of any times! As if the opening of the western continent by discovery and what has transpired since in North and South America were less than the small theatre of the antique or the aimless sleepwalking of the middle ages! The pride of the United States leaves the wealth and finesse of the cities and all returns of commerce and agriculture and all the magnitude of geography or shows of exterior victory to enjoy the breed of full-sized men or one full-sized man unconquerable and simple.

The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him the other continents arrive as contributions . . . he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake. His spirit responds to his country's spirit . . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes. Mississippi with annual freshets and changing chutes, Missouri and Columbia and Ohio and Saint Lawrence with the falls and beautiful masculine Hudson, do not embouchure where they spend themselves more than they embouchure into him. The blue breadth over the inland sea of Virginia and Maryland and the sea off Massachusetts and Maine and over Manhattan bay and over



Champlain and Erie and over Ontario and Huron and Michigan and Superior, and over the Texan and Mexican and Floridian and Cuban seas and over the seas off California and Oregon, is not tallied by the blue breadth of the waters below more than the breadth of above and below is tallied by him. When the long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast stretches longer he easily stretches with them north or south. He spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between them. On him rise solid growths that offset the growths of pine and cedar and hemlock and liveoak and locust and chestnut and cypress and hickory and limetree and cottonwood and tuliptree and cactus and wildvine and tamarind and persimmon . . . and tangles as tangled as any canebrake or swamp . . . and forests coated with transparent ice and icicles hanging from the boughs and crackling in the wind . . . and sides and peaks of mountains . . . and pasturage sweet and free as savannah or upland or prairie . . . with flights and songs and screams that answer those of the wildpigeon and highhold and orchard oriole and coot and surf-duck and redshouldered-hawk and fish-hawk and white-ibis and indian-hen and cat-owl and water-pheasant and qua-bird and pied-sheldrake and blackbird and mockingbird and buzzard and condor and night-heron and eagle. To him the hereditary countenance descends both mother's and father's. To him enter the essences of the real things and past and present events—of the enormous diversity of temperature and agriculture and mines—the tribes of red aborigines—the weatherbeaten vessels entering new ports or making landings on rocky coasts—the first settlements north or south—the rapid stature and muscle—the haughty defiance of '76, and the war and peace and formation of the constitution . . . the union always surrounded by blatherers and always calm and impregnable—the perpetual coming of immigrants—the wharfthem'd cities and superior marine—the unsurveyed interior—the loghouses and clearings and wild animals and hunters and trappers . . . the free commerce—the fisheries and whaling and gold-digging—the endless gestation of new states—the convening of Congress every December, the members duly coming up from all climates and the uttermost parts . . . the noble character of the young mechanics and of all free American workmen and workwomen . . . the general ardor and friendliness and enterprise—the perfect equality of the female with the male . . . the large amativeness—the fluid movement of the population—the factories and mercantile life and laborsaving machinery—the Yankee swap—the New-York firemen and the target excursion—the southern plantation life—the character of the northeast and of the northwest and southwest—slavery and the tremulous spreading of hands to protect it, and the stern opposition to it which



## LEAVES OF GRASS

**I**CELEBRATE 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.

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes . . . the shelves are crowded  
with perfumes,  
I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it,  
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume . . . it has no taste of the distillation  
. . . it is odorless,  
It is for my mouth forever . . . I am in love with it,  
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,  
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,  
Echos, ripples, and buzzed whispers . . . loveroot, silkthread, crotch and  
vine,

My respiration and inspiration . . . the beating of my heart . . . the pass-  
ing of blood and air through my lungs,  
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-  
colored sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,  
The sound of the belched words of my voice . . . words loosed to the  
eddies of the wind,

A few light kisses . . . a few embraces . . . a reaching around of arms,  
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,  
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and  
hillsides,

The feeling of health . . . the full-noon trill . . . the song of me rising  
from bed and meeting the sun.



Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the  
earth much?

Have you practiced so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all  
poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun . . . there are millions  
of suns left,

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand . . . nor look  
through the eyes of the dead . . . nor feed on the spectres in  
books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

I have heard what the talkers were talking . . . the talk of the begin-  
ning and the end,

But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,  
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;  
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,  
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

Urge and urge and urge,  
Always the procreant urge of the world.

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance . . . Always substance and  
increase,  
Always a knit of identity . . . always distinction . . . always a breed of  
life.

To elaborate is no avail . . . Learned and unlearned feel that it is so.

Sure as the most certain sure . . . plumb in the uprights, well entretied,  
braced in the beams,

Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,  
I and this mystery here we stand.

Clear and sweet is my soul . . . and clear and sweet is all that is not my  
soul.

Lack one lacks both . . . and the unseen is proved by the seen,  
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.

Showing the best and dividing it from the worst, age vexes age,  
Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they  
discuss I am silent, and go bathe and admire myself.

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty  
and clean,  
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less  
familiar than the rest.

I am satisfied . . . I see, dance, laugh, sing;  
As God comes a loving bedfellow and sleeps at my side all night and  
close on the peep of the day,  
And leaves for me baskets covered with white towels bulging the  
house with their plenty,  
Shall I postpone my acceptation and realization and scream at my eyes,  
That they turn from gazing after and down the road,  
And forthwith cipher and show me to a cent,  
Exactly the contents of one, and exactly the contents of two, and  
which is ahead?

Trippers and askers surround me,  
People I meet . . . the effect upon me of my early life . . . of the ward  
and city I live in . . . of the nation,  
The latest news . . . discoveries, inventions, societies . . . authors old and  
new,  
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, business, compliments, dues,  
The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,  
The sickness of one of my folks—or of myself . . . or ill-doing . . .  
or loss or lack of money . . . or depressions or exaltations,  
They come to me days and nights and go from me again,  
But they are not the Me myself.

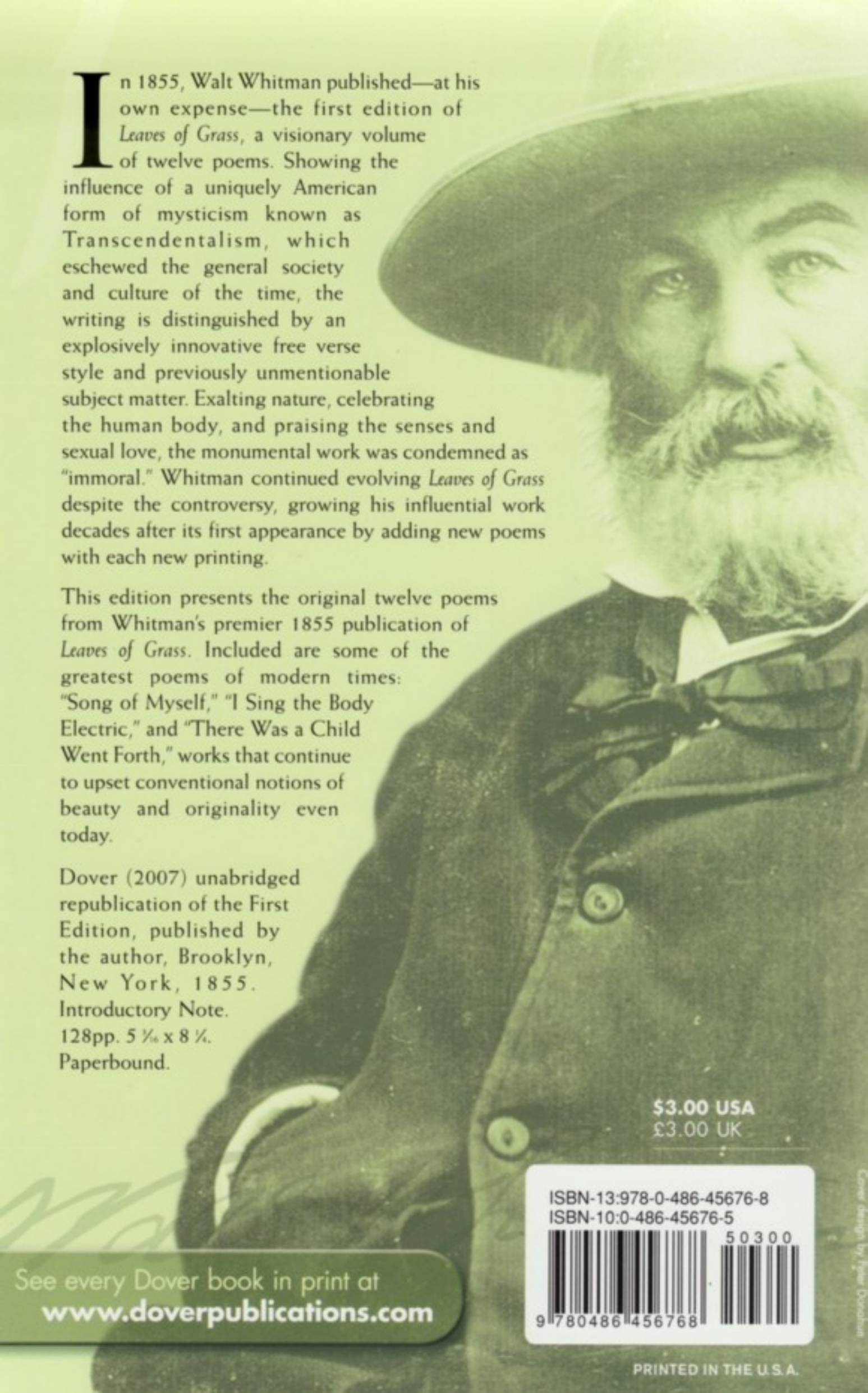
Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,  
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,  
Looks down, is erect, bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,  
Looks with its sidecurved head curious what will come next,  
Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it.

Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with  
linguists and contenders,  
I have no mockings or arguments . . . I witness and wait.

I believe in you my soul . . . the other I am must not abase itself to  
you,  
And you must not be abased to the other.

Loafe with me on the grass . . . loose the stop from your throat,  
Not words, not music or rhyme I want . . . not custom or lecture, not  
even the best,  
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.





In 1855, Walt Whitman published—at his own expense—the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a visionary volume of twelve poems. Showing the influence of a uniquely American form of mysticism known as Transcendentalism, which eschewed the general society and culture of the time, the writing is distinguished by an explosively innovative free verse style and previously unmentionable subject matter. Exalting nature, celebrating the human body, and praising the senses and sexual love, the monumental work was condemned as “immoral.” Whitman continued evolving *Leaves of Grass* despite the controversy, growing his influential work decades after its first appearance by adding new poems with each new printing.

This edition presents the original twelve poems from Whitman’s premier 1855 publication of *Leaves of Grass*. Included are some of the greatest poems of modern times: “Song of Myself,” “I Sing the Body Electric,” and “There Was a Child Went Forth,” works that continue to upset conventional notions of beauty and originality even today.

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