

Walt Whitman Onwards and Outwards

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On September 5, 1863, Walt Whitman wrote a letter to his friend Nat Bloom in New York City. Whitman describes his life and experiences as a nurse and expresses the deep joy which he is able to give to and receive from the "sometimes dying soldiers". Similarly, he shares loving and caring thoughts towards Bloom and his other friends back in New York, longing to hear and see them again. The emotion, passion, and life portrayed in his letter are all very characteristic of his poetry and life.

Walt Whitman, born on May 31, 1819, was the second son of Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor. He attended public school, learning the elementary skills of reading and writing. At home, his mother taught him the values of strong family ties, while his father fostered liberal intellectual and political attitudes. His formal education ended when he was eleven, and he began working as an office boy for the law offices of James B. Clark and his son Edward. Edward gave him a subscription to a local circulation library. The young Whitman became engrossed in reading, and this event was integral to the rest of his life. In 1831, he joined the staff of the *Long Island Patriot* and wrote short filler material. For the next two decades, he was an occasional printer, compositor, free-lance writer, editor, and school teacher, who dabbled in politics.

The most formative years of his life were probably 1850-1855. During these years not much is known of his activities; however, he experienced deep intellectual and spiritual growth, which manifested in 1855 when he published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. His poems abandoned conventions, such as meter and rhyme, and mixed the spiritual with the earthy. The great mass of America largely scorned or ignored the work. But, in a letter to Whitman, the great American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed." *Leaves of Grass* became his great body of work, changing and growing until his death in 1892.

Experiences during the late 1850s contributed to the third and subsequent editions of *Leaves of Grass*. During this time, he was part of an informal group of friends, later known as the Fred Gray Association. Whitman and the other young men met regularly at Pfaff's saloon, a center for New York's bohemia. Not much is known of the Fred Gray Association, named after Fred Gray (mentioned in the letter), although they may have explored male-male affection. Whitman met Fred Vaughan here. The two shared an intense

friendship which likely inspired the comradeship and manly-love found in the cycle of poems "Calamus", published in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Other names in the letter--Chauncy, Russell, Perkins, and Raymond--were friends, but now we know nothing about them.

Nat Bloom, also a member of the Fred Gray Association, became a fairly successful merchant of fancy goods and an importer, owning a store on Broadway. He was probably in business for about twenty years: first with the firm Phelps, Bloom, & Brown, who dissolved in 1875; next with Bloom & Brown, who dissolved in 1879; and then alone. He seems to have done quite a bit of traveling to Europe for business reasons. On February 16, 1884, the *New York Times* reported that a Nathaniel Bloom had been struck by a locomotive. This was likely the Bloom of Whitman's acquaintance, because the article also noted that he [Bloom] had recently returned from a business trip to Europe. He suffered a broken arm and injuries to the head, but recovered. During the late 1880s and early 1890s he began to have business troubles. After this time, he seems to have slipped below the historical radar.

In late 1862, an event occurred which would drastically change the rest of Whitman's life. The Battle of Fredericksburg took place on December 13th, and on the 16th the *New York Herald* printed a casualty roster, listed was "First Lieutenant G. W. Whitmore". Whitman's family, fearing that this was a misprint of "Whitman" and thus the younger brother George, urged Whitman to travel to Washington; he left later that same day. Unable to find his brother in the hospitals in Washington D.C., Whitman ventured to the battlefield where he experienced first-hand the devastating effects of war. Although George had only suffered a minor injury to his cheek, Whitman stayed in camp for several more weeks nursing the injured, and then returned to Washington D.C. escorting a group of seriously wounded and dying soldiers.

While in Washington D.C., he met William O' Connor, a friend from Boston, who provided Whitman with a room--likely the one mentioned in the letter. He also met Charles Eldridge, his former publisher, who was now an assistant to the Army Paymaster, Major Hapgood (mentioned in the postscript). With Eldridge's help, Whitman obtained a part-time job as a copyist in the Paymaster's office. This job, also referred to in the letter, satisfied his simple lifestyle and moods and allowed him to spend his afternoons in the hospitals.

Although he missed Nat and his other friends from New York, Whitman belonged in the hospitals caring for the wounded and dying soldiers. In his letter, he mentioned how profoundly these experiences affected him and how warmly and joyfully he tended to the young soldiers. This attitude is found throughout the early editions of *Leaves of Grass*, in which Whitman celebrated love, comradeship, and the universal spirit which pervaded all humanity. He focused on the wholeness, both physically and spiritually, of the body and

individual man. He also rejoiced in the greatness of America. Given these characteristics of his poetry, it was no surprise that the Civil War and the wounded soldiers had such a profound effect on Whitman. America was divided; men lost limbs; brothers killed brothers; optimism grew to despair; love turned to hate. His time as a nurse was time to repair and to bring to wholeness men, comradeship, spirituality, and love--America. It was here that he put his words to action: "Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity, / When I give I give myself". However, Whitman needed them as much as they needed him. As a nurse, he was searching for that part of him that was lost due to the War--the optimistic innocence of himself and his country. This search inspired his poetry in "Drum-Taps", in which he wrote not of war, but the aftereffects--the sick, the trauma, the bodies. He would move between Washington and New York, but he never left the hospitals. Whitman estimated that he visited between 80,000 and 100,000 wounded and sick during his lifetime. His life as a nurse earned him the nicknames "wound-dresser" and "Good Gray Poet".

As was previously mentioned, a shift occurred in Whitman's poetry. The first several editions of *Leaves of Grass* focused on the transcendental powers and universality of the self. However, after his experiences as a nurse, his poetry not only included the limitations of the self, namely the horror of war and death, but also emphasized the healing powers of others. This shift was no doubt a direct result of his experiences as a nurse; effects of which can be seen in his letter. Whitman molded *Leaves of Grass* allowing the book to grow with America--the youthful optimism, the trauma, and then renewed promise.

Whitman's poetry and life fit firmly within the Transcendental movement. He was also the first American poet to call for equality among all men and women. He combined the greatest aspects of both Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Like Emerson, Whitman believed in the universal spirit--the divinity--which pervaded all Nature and men. He heard several of Emerson's lectures, including "The Poet". In this essay Emerson writes that all of Nature is poetry, and the Poet must look beyond mere appearances, allowing the personal experience to become a universal experience. Emerson's vision perfectly describes Whitman and his poetry. Like Thoreau, Whitman put transcendental doctrine to practice. However, whereas Thoreau removed himself from others, Whitman immersed himself in others. Through his nursing experiences, he tapped into and then allowed the energy and divinity of others to flow through him, inspiring his poetry. Whitman was at once both the self-reliant man and the transparent, universal eyeball of Emerson's and Thoreau's essays.

Whitman's poetry is closely linked to his life because his poems were his life. Throughout his poetry, he tries to capture the spontaneous overflow of emotion and feeling. Like his poetry, his letter shows deep emotion and passion rooted in love and friendship forever radiating onwards and outwards.

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Transcription of a letter from Walt Whitman to Nat Bloom

[The original letter is held in the Manuscript Collection of the University of Rochester Rare Books and Special Collections Department, gift of Charles A. Brown, class of 1879..]

Washington September 5 1863

Dear Nat

I wish you were here if only to enjoy the bright & beautiful weather we are having here, now for about two weeks -- then it is sufficiently cool & the air buoyant & inspiring-

Dear friend how long it is since we have seen each other, since those pleasant meetings & those hot spiced rums & suppers & our dear friends Gray & Chauncy, & Russell, & Fritschy too, (who for a while at first used to sit so silent,) & Perkins & our friend Raymond -- how

long it seems -- how much I enjoyed it all [.] -- What a difference it is with me here -- I tell you Nat my evenings are frequently spent in scenes that make a terrible difference -- for I am still a hospital visitor, there has not passed a day for months, (or at least not more than two) that I have not been among the sick & wounded, either in hospitals or down in camp -- occasionally here I spend the evenings in hospital - the experience [sic] is a profound one, beyond all else & touches me personally, egotistically, in unprecedented ways - I mean the way often the amputated, sick, sometimes dying soldiers cling & cleave to me as it were as a man overboard to a plank, & the perfect content they have if I will remain with them [.] sit on the side of the cot awhile, some youngsters often, & caress them &c. - It is delicious to be the object of so much love & reliance [.] & to do them such good, soothe & pacify torments [.] wounds &c - you will doubtless see in what I have said the reason I continue so long in this kind of life - as I am entirely on my own hook too.

Life goes however quite well with me here - I work a few hours a day at copying &c. occasionally [sic] write a newspaper letter, & make enough money to pay my expenses - I have a little room, & live a sort of German or Parisian student life - always get my breakfast in my room, (have a little spirit lamp) & run on free & happy enough, untrammelled by business, for I make what little employment I have suit my moods - walk quite a good deal, & in this weather the rich & splendid environs of Washington are an unfailing fountain to me - go down the river or off into Virginia once in a while - all around us here are forts, by the score - great ambulance & teamsters' camps &c - these I go to, - some have little hospitals, I visit, &c &c

Dear Nat, your good & friendly letter came safe, & was indeed welcome - I had not thought you had forgotten me, but I wondered why you did not write - what comfort you must take out there in the country, by the river- I have read your letter many times, as I do from all my dear friends & boys there in New York - Perkins lately wrote me a first-rate letter, & I will reply to it soon - I wish to see you all very much - I wish you to give my love to Fritschy, & Fred Gray - I desire both to write to me - Nat you also my dear comrade, & tell me all about the boys & everything, all the little items are so good - should Charles Russell visit New York, I wish you to say to him I send him my love -- I wish you the same to Perk, & to Kingsley, & Ben Knower [.] So good bye my comrade till we meet, & God bless you dear friend

Walt

Address me, care Major Hapgood. Paymaster USA. [cor.?] 15 & [F.?] Washington DC