

WALT WHITMAN

COMPLETE POETRY AND COLLECTED PROSE

Leaves of Grass (1855)

Leaves of Grass (1891-92)

Complete Prose Works (1892)

Supplementary Prose

Justin Kaplan, ed.



THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA

New York

1982

From plenty of persons near and yet the right person not near,
 From the soft sliding of hands over me and thrusting of
 fingers through my hair and beard,
 From the long sustain'd kiss upon the mouth or bosom,
 From the close pressure that makes me or any man drunk,
 fainting with excess,
 From what the divine husband knows, from the work of
 fatherhood,
 From exultation, victory and relief, from the bedfellow's
 embrace in the night,
 From the act-poems of eyes, hands, hips and bosoms,
 From the cling of the trembling arm,
 From the bending curve and the clinch,
 From side by side the pliant coverlet off-throwing,
 From the one so unwilling to have me leave, and me just as
 unwilling to leave,
 (Yet a moment O tender waiter, and I return,)
 From the hour of shining stars and dropping dews,
 From the night a moment I emerging flitting out,
 Celebrate you act divine and you children prepared for,
 And you stalwart loins.

I Sing the Body Electric

I

I SING the body electric,
 The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
 They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
 And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge
 of the soul.

Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own bodies
 conceal themselves?
 And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who
 defile the dead?
 And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
 And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?

2

The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the
 body itself balks account,
 That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect.

The expression of the face balks account,
 But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in
 his face,
 It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints
 of his hips and wrists,
 It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist
 and knees, dress does not hide him,
 The strong sweet quality he has strikes through the cotton
 and broadcloth,
 To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps
 more,
 You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and
 shoulder-side.

The sprawl and fulness of babes, the bosoms and heads of
 women, the folds of their dress, their style as we pass in
 the street, the contour of their shape downwards,
 The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims
 through the transparent green-shine, or lies with his face
 up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water,
 The bending forward and backward of rowers in row-boats,
 the horseman in his saddle,
 Girls, mothers, house-keepers, in all their performances,
 The group of laborers seated at noon-time with their open
 dinner-kettles, and their wives waiting,
 The female soothing a child, the farmer's daughter in the
 garden or cow-yard,
 The young fellow hoeing corn, the sleigh-driver driving his
 six horses through the crowd,
 The wrestle of wrestlers, two apprentice-boys, quite grown,
 lusty, good-natured, native-born, out on the vacant lot
 at sundown after work,
 The coats and caps thrown down, the embrace of love and
 resistance,

The upper-hold and under-hold, the hair rumpled over and blinding the eyes;
 The march of firemen in their own costumes, the play of masculine muscle through clean-setting trowsers and waist-straps,
 The slow return from the fire, the pause when the bell strikes suddenly again, and the listening on the alert,
 The natural, perfect, varied attitudes, the bent head, the curv'd neck and the counting;
 Such-like I love—I loosen myself, pass freely, am at the mother's breast with the little child,
 Swim with the swimmers, wrestle with wrestlers, march in line with the firemen, and pause, listen, count.

3

I knew a man, a common farmer, the father of five sons,
 And in them the fathers of sons, and in them the fathers of sons.
 This man was of wonderful vigor, calmness, beauty of person,
 The shape of his head, the pale yellow and white of his hair and beard, the immeasurable meaning of his black eyes, the richness and breadth of his manners,
 These I used to go and visit him to see, he was wise also, He was six feet tall, he was over eighty years old, his sons were massive, clean, bearded, tan-faced, handsome,
 They and his daughters loved him, all who saw him loved him,
 They did not love him by allowance, they loved him with personal love,
 He drank water only, the blood show'd like scarlet through the clear-brown skin of his face,
 He was a frequent gunner and fisher, he sail'd his boat himself, he had a fine one presented to him by a ship-joiner, he had fowling-pieces presented to him by men that loved him,
 When he went with his five sons and many grand-sons to hunt or fish, you would pick him out as the most beautiful and vigorous of the gang,

You would wish long and long to be with him, you would wish to sit by him in the boat that you and he might touch each other.

4

I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,
 To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,
 To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,
 To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?
 I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.

There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well,
 All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

5

This is the female form,
 A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
 It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction,
 I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than a helpless vapor, all falls aside but myself and it,
 Books, art, religion, time, the visible and solid earth, and what was expected of heaven or fear'd of hell, are now consumed,
 Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of it, the response likewise ungovernable,
 Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent falling hands all diffused, mine too diffused,
 Ebb stung by the flow and flow stung by the ebb, love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching,
 Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice,
 Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn,
 Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
 Lost in the cleave of the claspings and sweet-flesh'd day.

This the nucleus—after the child is born of woman, man is
born of woman,
This the bath of birth, this the merge of small and large, and
the outlet again.

Be not ashamed women, your privilege encloses the rest, and
is the exit of the rest,
You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the
soul.

The female contains all qualities and tempers them,
She is in her place and moves with perfect balance,
She is all things duly veil'd, she is both passive and active,
She is to conceive daughters as well as sons, and sons as well
as daughters.

As I see my soul reflected in Nature,
As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness,
sanity, beauty,
See the bent head and arms folded over the breast, the
Female I see.

6

The male is not less the soul nor more, he too is in his place,
He too is all qualities, he is action and power,
The flush of the known universe is in him,
Scorn becomes him well, and appetite and defiance become
him well,
The wildest largest passions, bliss that is utmost, sorrow that
is utmost become him well, pride is for him,
The full-spread pride of man is calming and excellent to the
soul,
Knowledge becomes him, he likes it always, he brings every
thing to the test of himself,
Whatever the survey, whatever the sea and the sail he strikes
soundings at last only here,
(Where else does he strike soundings except here?)

The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred,
No matter who it is, it is sacred—is it the meanest one in
the laborers' gang?

Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the
wharf?
Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off,
just as much as you,
Each has his or her place in the procession.

(All is a procession,
The universe is a procession with measured and perfect
motion.)

Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest
ignorant?
Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or
she has no right to a sight?
Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse
float, and the soil is on the surface, and water runs and
vegetation sprouts,
For you only, and not for him and her?

7

A man's body at auction,
(For before the war I often go to the slave-mart and watch
the sale,)
I help the auctioneer, the sloven does not half know his
business.

Gentlemen look on this wonder,
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high
enough for it,
For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without
one animal or plant,
For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd.

In this head the all-baffling brain,
In it and below it the makings of heroes.

Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning
in tendon and nerve,
They shall be stript that you may see them.

Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,
Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not
flabby, good-sized arms and legs,
And wonders within there yet.

Within there runs blood,
The same old blood! the same red-running blood!
There swells and jets a heart, there all passions, desires,
reachings, aspirations,
(Do you think they are not there because they are not
express'd in parlors and lecture-rooms?)

This is not only one man, this the father of those who shall
be fathers in their turns,
In him the start of populous states and rich republics,
Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments
and enjoyments.

How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his
offspring through the centuries?
(Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you
could trace back through the centuries?)

8

A woman's body at auction,
She too is not only herself, she is the teeming mother of
mothers,
She is the bearer of them that shall grow and be mates to
the mothers.

Have you ever loved the body of a woman?
Have you ever loved the body of a man?
Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all
nations and times all over the earth?

If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred,
And the glory and sweet of a man is the token of manhood
untainted,
And in man or woman a clean, strong, firm-fibred body, is
more beautiful than the most beautiful face.

Have you seen the fool that corrupted his own live body? or
the fool that corrupted her own live body?
For they do not conceal themselves, and cannot conceal
themselves.

9

O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men
and women, nor the likes of the parts of you,
I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of
the soul, (and that they are the soul,)
I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems,
and that they are my poems,
Man's, woman's, child's, youth's, wife's, husband's, mother's,
father's, young man's, young woman's poems,
Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,
Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows, and the waking
or sleeping of the lids,
Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the
jaw-hinges,
Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition,
Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, back of the neck,
neck-slue,
Strong shoulders, manly beard, scapula, hind-shoulders, and
the ample side-round of the chest,
Upper-arm, armpit, elbow-socket, lower-arm, arm-sinews,
arm-bones,
Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb,
forefinger, finger-joints, finger-nails,
Broad breast-front, curling hair of the breast, breast-bone,
breast-side,
Ribs, belly, backbone, joints of the backbone,
Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round,
man-balls, man-root,
Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk above,
Leg-fibres, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under-leg,
Ankles, instep, foot-ball, toes, toe-joints, the heel;
All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or
your body or of any one's body, male or female,
The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and
clean,

The brain in its folds inside the skull-frame,
 Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity,
 Womanhood, and all that is a woman, and the man that
 comes from woman,
 The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter,
 weeping, love-looks, love-perturbations and risings,
 The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting
 aloud,
 Food, drink, pulse, digestion, sweat, sleep, walking,
 swimming,
 Poise on the hips, leaping, reclining, embracing, arm-curving
 and tightening,
 The continual changes of the flex of the mouth, and around
 the eyes,
 The skin, the sunburnt shade, freckles, hair,
 The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand
 the naked meat of the body,
 The circling rivers, the breath, and breathing it in and out,
 The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and thence
 downward toward the knees,
 The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and
 the marrow in the bones,
 The exquisite realization of health;
 O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only,
 but of the soul,
 O I say now these are the soul!

A Woman Waits for Me

A WOMAN waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking,
 Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of
 the right man were lacking.

Sex contains all, bodies, souls,
 Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations,
 Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the
 seminal milk,
 All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all the passions, loves,
 beauties, delights of the earth,

All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd persons of the
 earth,
 These are contain'd in sex as parts of itself and justifications
 of itself.

Without shame the man I like knows and avows the
 deliciousness of his sex,
 Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers.

Now I will dismiss myself from impassive women,
 I will go stay with her who waits for me, and with those
 women that are warm-blooded and sufficient for me,
 I see that they understand me and do not deny me,
 I see that they are worthy of me, I will be the robust
 husband of those women.

They are not one jot less than I am,
 They are tann'd in the face by shining suns and blowing
 winds,
 Their flesh has the old divine suppleness and strength,
 They know how to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run,
 strike, retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves,
 They are ultimate in their own right—they are calm, clear,
 well-possess'd of themselves.

I draw you close to me, you women,
 I cannot let you go, I would do you good,
 I am for you, and you are for me, not only for our own
 sake, but for others' sakes,
 Envelop'd in you sleep greater heroes and bards,
 They refuse to awake at the touch of any man but me.

It is I, you women, I make my way,
 I am stern, acrid, large, undissuadable, but I love you,
 I do not hurt you any more than is necessary for you,
 I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these
 States, I press with slow rude muscle,
 I brace myself effectually, I listen to no entreaties,
 I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long
 accumulated within me.