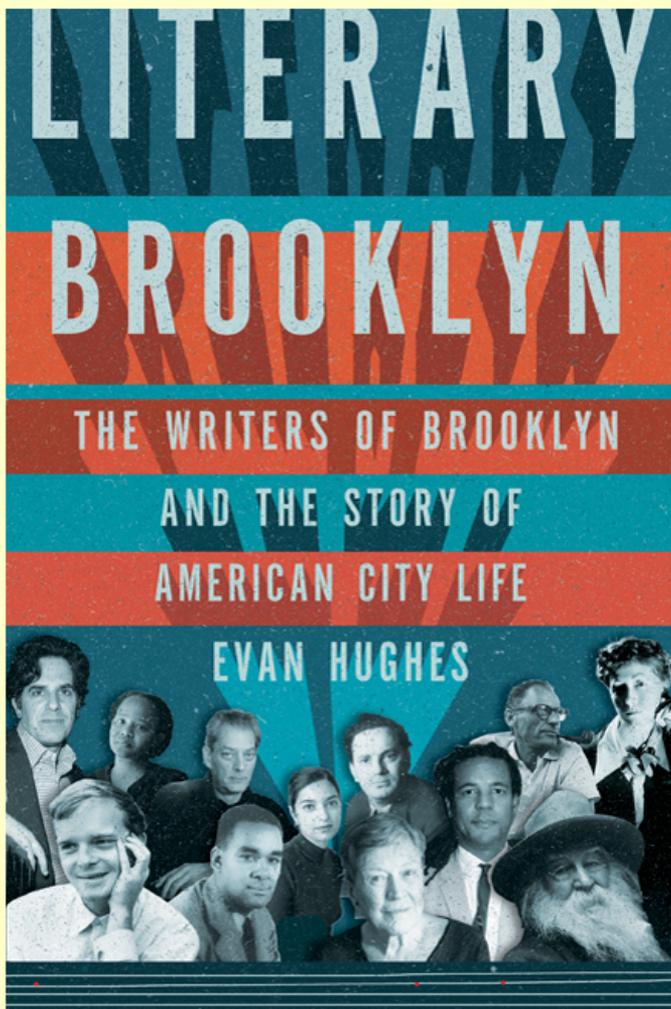


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1.

The Grandfather of Literary Brooklyn

WALT WHITMAN

*Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so
I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of
a crowd.*

—“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” WALT WHITMAN

WHEN WALT WHITMAN WAS IN HIS EARLY THIRTIES, HE HAD already lived out the first act of his life. The son of a failing carpenter, he had been a grammar school dropout; an office boy for a law firm; an apprentice to various printers; and, disastrously, a schoolteacher. Eventually he found a calling in journalism, moving upstairs from the printing room to the editorial office. And at the age of twenty-six, in 1846, he was named the editor of booming Brooklyn’s leading newspaper, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, where his office window looked out on the foot of Fulton Street, by the glinting, well-traveled East River and the Fulton Ferry. He became a prominent and eccentric man about town. To entertain people he would shout out lines from Shakespeare and Homer from a stagecoach or

at the seashore, and he would hum arias as he walked down the street. He was talked about. He was known.

Then, in 1848, he was fired from the *Eagle* after clashing with his boss over politics. His next newspaper jobs were short-lived, and he began to slip out of view. He took on the look of a social dropout, with shaggy hair, a gray beard, and overalls. In the ensuing half decade he was a sometime freelance journalist, a sometime book-seller at a store he operated out of his house on a lot he'd bought for a hundred dollars, and a sometime carpenter. And sometimes he was plain unemployed. "There was a great boom in Brooklyn in the early fifties, and he had his chance then," his brother George later said, "but you know he made nothing of that chance." Strange and a bit rough around the edges, Whitman didn't make it easy for others to reach out to him. Things were not looking good.

But something powerful was taking hold of him from within: "I found myself remaining possess'd, at the age of thirty-one to thirty-two, with a special desire and conviction . . . that had been flitting through my previous life, or hovering on the flanks, [that] finally dominated everything else." He began composing a series of very long, unstructured poems, of a kind not yet seen by the world. Each day, he took them into the Rome Brothers print shop at the corner of Cranberry Street and Fulton Street, where he and the owners set them into type during off-hours. He would sleep late, write more, return to the print shop. It was the nineteenth-century equivalent of self-publishing out of a Kinko's. And the result was *Leaves of Grass*. "No other book in the history of American letters," Malcolm Cowley has written, "was so completely an individual or do-it-yourself project."

Where *Leaves of Grass* came from no one will know. But as Whitman said, his masterpiece drew breath from the people of Brooklyn, his literal and spiritual home. Walt Whitman, as much as he was "one of a crowd," was America's first great bard and the keystone of Brooklyn's literary tradition.

It requires a considerable feat of imagination today to picture Brooklyn as it was when Whitman first arrived as a child of three,

in 1823. It was a place so different from the huge urban mass of today, with its population of 2.5 million, that it is scarcely possible to hold it in the mind's eye. Then a separate entity from the city of New York, which was restricted to the island of Manhattan, Brooklyn was a placid little town of low-slung houses topped with billowing chimney smoke, tucked in close to the shore of the East River; the surrounding area later incorporated into Brooklyn consisted of large farms of rolling hills and a handful of even smaller hamlets. What is now the borough of Brooklyn boasted about as many residents as today's Wasilla, Alaska.

Across the water, Manhattan was beginning to become a central place in American commerce and in the American imagination, but its tallest building was only four stories high. You could stand in Brooklyn Heights and see clear across Manhattan and the Hudson and well into New Jersey. From that spot you could watch a great crowd of high-masted ships carrying goods up and down the East River and especially the Hudson.

In Brooklyn in 1823 there was no regular police force, no public transportation, and flickering gas lamps were just being introduced to help light the eerily quiet, unpopulated nighttime streets. Families had to gather round the fireplace to cook or stay warm. Some had horses and a carriage, but they contended with rutted, narrow dirt roads, and there was no organized stagecoach service. Residents kept pigs and chickens that roamed in the streets in daytime, rooting through the garbage alongside open sewers. Water was drawn from street wells and carried home. Taverns and stables stood among houses and shanties. The odors were rank. To the east of the village—on land now densely packed with multistory apartment buildings—were sprawling green fields still owned mostly by the Dutch. They kept a firm hold on their properties, assured of a market for their produce and livestock in the village of Brooklyn and in Manhattan.

Many slaves worked the land and tended to houses. In 1800, before slaveholding was abolished in New York State, in 1827, about 60 percent of the white households within Brooklyn's current borders

owned at least one slave, the highest proportion in the North. The nationwide battle over slavery would shadow Whitman's life as it grew to be the foremost threat to the country.

But America was a young nation in Whitman's childhood, and the Civil War was still far off. Whitman's father, also named Walter, was born the same year as the federal government, in 1789. Whitman's great-uncle fought and died in the Revolutionary War's first major battle, the Battle of Brooklyn, in 1776. That rout by the English cost twelve hundred American lives in a matter of hours, with at least another fifteen hundred wounded, captured, or missing. With defeat clearly at hand, George Washington, standing where Court Street now crosses Atlantic Avenue, is said to have cried, "Good God! What brave fellows I must this day lose!" But acts of valor on the American side would live on—particularly in the story of the Maryland forces who sacrificed themselves almost to a one in challenging and delaying the much larger British contingent at the Old Stone House, near today's Fourth Avenue and Ninth Street in Brooklyn. That stand allowed Washington and his men to make an overnight escape across the East River to Manhattan, whispering to one another in the fog to avoid alerting the British. If it weren't for this getaway, the war could easily have ended in a brutally swift British victory. According to the historian Kenneth Jackson, one observer later said, "The Declaration of Independence that was signed in ink in Philadelphia was signed in blood in Brooklyn." Both the heroism and the tragedy of the Battle of Brooklyn and its aftermath would become a touchstone of Whitman's work.

Between 1790 and 1810, Brooklyn's population nearly tripled, as Irish, Yankee, and Manhattanite new arrivals crowded out the Dutch. The Brooklyn Navy Yard gave rise to other shipyards and maritime trades, providing work for carpenters and craftsmen. Wooden market stalls stood by the water, and small manufacture spread out from the river. Whitman's father moved to Brooklyn to be a carpenter and builder, in the hopes of capitalizing on the town's population boom. Although the boom continued, he didn't succeed, perhaps because he favored old ways of building and

because he lacked the gift for self-promotion, though his son would soon possess it in spades. The Whitmans moved at least ten times in the space of a decade.* Walt attended Brooklyn's single elementary school, District School No. 1, which had been established in 1816 on Concord and Adams Streets, for about five years. That would remain the only formal education for the man about whom the venerated critic Harold Bloom has written, "No comparable figure in the arts has emerged from the last four centuries in the Americas." Before Whitman, American literature was largely for Harvard men, like Emerson, Thoreau, and Henry James. It called to mind men of leisure, with crisp white collars and hired help. Then Whitman barged in.

Walt's family's finances forced him to leave school at age eleven and go to work, and for the decades to follow he would have the kind of extraordinarily varied and checkered work history shared by many writers since. In his childhood and adolescence, Brooklyn offered very little in the way of literary and cultural life. Few residents wanted to give money for a proposed Apprentices' Library in 1824, so library representatives took a wheelbarrow door to door to collect cast-off pamphlets and books. The literacy rate was low and the media hadn't extended a very meaningful reach into Brooklyn, or indeed much of the nation. The stodgy and relatively expensive political newspapers had not yet met with the competition of the mass-oriented "penny press," whose pioneers were the *New York Sun* (founded in 1833) and the *New York Herald* (1835).

Soon Whitman would enter the burgeoning journalism trade, beginning his apprenticeship in the laborious work of typesetting and printing at the Brooklyn-based Long Island *Patriot*. He bounced from publications of one political stripe or another in Brooklyn,

* Their known addresses at this time were on Front Street, Cranberry Street, Henry Street, Johnson Street, Adams Street, Tillary Street, and Liberty Street (no longer in existence). In later years Whitman lived on Prince Street, on Myrtle Avenue, on Cumberland Street, at 99 Ryerson Street (the only one of his homes that still stands), on Classon Avenue, and on Portland Avenue, on the site of today's Walt Whitman Houses, a public housing project.

Manhattan, and Long Island, picking up writing and editing skills along with the craft of printing. In the 1830s, as New York slid toward a depression, the newspaper business ran into trouble, and Whitman fled to Long Island and became (at about seventeen) a schoolteacher. An itinerant and miserably unhappy five years followed. "O, damnation, damnation!" he wrote, "thy other name is school-teaching." He also attempted, with little success, to publish his own Long Island paper, but he moved to Manhattan in 1841 and joined its revived journalism industry. Tired of living in one Manhattan boardinghouse after another for short stints—a pattern that many writers in their early twenties would follow—he moved back to Brooklyn in 1845.

That was Whitman's last time living in Manhattan. He always took to Brooklyn more heartily. A great deal of his learning and cultural exposure came from Manhattan, but he saw it as an overcrowded place and the center of the kind of commerce he considered vulgar. In "Brooklyniana," a series of articles he published in his forties, his lasting pride in his hometown is evident. Brooklyn's "situation for grandeur, beauty and salubrity is unsurpassed probably on the whole surface of the globe," he wrote, "and its destiny is to be among the most famed and choice of the half dozen of the leading cities of the world." He would remain in Brooklyn for the next seventeen years, his longest stay in one place and the period when he came into his own.

He drew energy from Brooklyn, absorbing, as he said later, the immense and moving power of everyday lives. Striking a chord that echoes down through the last century and a half of Brooklyn literature, he relished Brooklyn's position at an arm's length from the mass of humanity and the incessant rattle of business in Manhattan. Near the end of those seventeen years, he wrote of Brooklyn with evident pride, "It may not generally be known that our city is getting to have quite a worldwide reputation." He added: "With much greater attractions than our neighboring island of New York, Brooklyn is steadily drawing hither the best portion of the business population of the great adjacent metropolis, who find here a

superior place for dwelling.” Indeed, since before Whitman’s birth wealthy businessmen and merchants had begun building fine homes in the Brooklyn Heights neighborhood, which overlooked the East River and offered a short commute on the ferry to their jobs in lower Manhattan. Whitman put his finger, then, on a trend that would drive Brooklyn’s history: many people reliant in their professional lives on Manhattan would find Brooklyn a more pleasing place to live.

But it wasn’t the home-owning class that most interested Whitman. He identified more, as writers tend to do, with those who had something of the countercultural in them—those who were, in a favorite word of his, “agitators.” In his mind he was always allied with the common and even lowly man, the one who was spurned by others. He would sometimes be coy about the extent of his reading because he didn’t want to be associated with the snobbery he saw among the learned. Such views can be traced back to his father, who “believed in resisting much, obeying little,” in the words of Whitman biographer Justin Kaplan. He trained his sons “as radical Democrats, on the side of the farmer, the laborer, the small tradesman, and the ‘people.’” The poet and aesthete James Russell Lowell once warned a foreigner against paying a visit to Whitman after he had become famous. Lowell pegged him as “a rowdy, a New York tough, a loafer, a frequenter of low places, a friend of cab drivers!” Whitman would have liked the description.



The changes that have occurred in Brooklyn in the last forty years are truly momentous, but they cannot compare to those of Whitman’s first decades, the era that preceded and influenced the early editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Brooklyn evolved from a quiet village of about five thousand at Whitman’s arrival to the third-largest city in the nation by the time of the Civil War, when Whitman was in his mid-forties. In his twenties alone the population tripled. Part of what spurred the growth was Brooklyn’s investment in an industrial waterfront that competed with Manhattan’s. In the 1830s,

Williamsburgh, then a separate town from Brooklyn (and spelled with an *h*), built large wharves along the East River and, much to New York's dismay, a new ferry line to Manhattan, which transported commuters both ways. By the 1850s the waterside factory district stretched from Greenpoint and Williamsburgh in the north, down past the Navy Yard, and on to the southern edge of South Brooklyn, where the Atlantic Basin, a new forty-acre shipping terminal in today's Red Hook, drew much Erie Canal traffic away from Manhattan. Along this corridor, iron foundries flourished, as did breweries, distilleries, sugar refineries, and drug companies (Pfizer started up in Williamsburgh in 1849).

These developments did little to glamorize Brooklyn or increase its prestige. The tourists were still over the river, promenading on Broadway. Brooklyn was becoming a boiler room belowdecks of the region's economic ship. And who was stoking the boiler? Immigrants, in large part. Williamsburgh was turning into a version of Manhattan's Kleindeutschland: by 1847 it was two-thirds German. Irish and British were also arriving in massive numbers, bringing the foreign-born proportion of the population to roughly half in 1855. Joining the immigrant working class, though, were members of the middle class—young professionals, clerks, and shop owners—who migrated from Manhattan while holding on to their jobs there. The place of choice for the most affluent remained Brooklyn Heights. Others spread southward into the more affordable area that incorporated today's Cobble Hill, Boerum Hill, and Carroll Gardens. The frontier neighborhoods to the east, land of bargains, were Fort Greene and East New York.

As Brooklyn rapidly urbanized and became more commercially active, it also gained something of a cultural foothold—developments that don't necessarily go hand in hand in the growth of cities. Whitman had no true local literary equals, but around him there emerged an intellectual ferment, and in particular a multiplicity of voices that swam against the current of mainstream society. He befriended activists in the women's rights movement, wrote in the papers in defiance of economic injustice to women, and

embraced women as equals in poetry. Striking a note that was characteristically both inclusive and controversial, he wrote, "I am the poet of woman the same as man, / And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man." Although he was not a Quaker—he attended many churches, but never a single one for very long—Whitman venerated the iconoclastic Quaker leader Elias Hicks, whose radically democratic version of the faith, denying any special sanctity of Christ, had gained ascendancy quickly in Whitman's childhood. Whitman lived in an age when orators achieved widespread popularity and whipped up a great stir—nowhere more so than in Brooklyn, where a more accessible pulpit style took root. At one point he wrote regular columns reviewing local sermons and speeches. Whitman didn't align himself with any religion or political perspective but gave due attention and credit to the art of speaking out—the American religion, you might say, in his eyes.

The most famous local orator was Henry Ward Beecher, who packed the house beginning in 1847 at the Plymouth Church, still active today, on the corner of Hicks and Orange Streets in Brooklyn Heights. So many Manhattanites came to see him that on Sundays the Fulton Ferry came to be called "Beecher's Ferry." With his informal manner, his rousing voice, and his defiance of the norms of religion, Beecher offered a combination, it was said, of Saint Paul and P. T. Barnum. Not surprisingly, he became Whitman's favorite Brooklyn minister. Beecher's sister was Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* energized the abolitionist movement. After early objections to freeing existing slaves, Henry Ward Beecher, for his part, turned Plymouth Church into a center of antislavery activity and held "auctions" where church members bought the freedom of particular slaves. Brooklyn became a vibrant center of abolitionism, and Beecher grew to be a national and even international figure. Fierce division over this most fundamental issue of the day marked the whole period of Whitman's intellectual coming-of-age, a tumultuous era in national politics.

The newspaper business held a place in the thick of it all.

Where Whitman himself stood on slavery would be made clearest when he served as editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, his most prominent journalistic position. Although he was still in his twenties when he was hired as the editor, he had become a man of considerable experience in journalism and seemed a natural for the position. He had been trained and, more to the point, had trained himself for the role. In *Walt Whitman: Song of Himself*, Jerome Loving writes, "If a whaling ship was Melville's Harvard and Yale, Brooklyn and newspaper work were this poet's university." The *Eagle* was the leading paper of Brooklyn, and Whitman possessed not only a deep familiarity with the life of the city and its surroundings but a formidable grasp of the national scene. In Brooklyn, the political forces shaping the nation were intensified and writ large, and he appeared more than happy to play a central role. The paper was steeped in a sense of Brooklyn pride that pitted itself against Manhattan, a pride that exists to this day, and it was a fitting place for Whitman to give unbridled voice to his populist views.

Although he adopted neither extreme in the debate over emancipation, he was anything but indifferent. An undeniable strain of racism ran through his thinking, yet he objected to slavery. He famously wrote, in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, "The attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots." But his main preoccupation was not the slaves themselves but the danger of the nationwide crisis over their fate. In the *Eagle* he came out firmly in support of the Wilmot Proviso, which proposed a ban on slavery's expansion into the new territories of the West, in a dispute then on everyone's lips. He wrote, "*We must plant ourselves firmly on the side of freedom, and openly espouse it.*" The owner of the *Eagle*, Isaac Van Anden, fell into line when Democratic leaders dropped their support for the proviso. Whitman, never one to back down and always a proud heretic, wrote an editorial in defiance of his boss's views, and weeks later he was out of a job.



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