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Special Collections F lyer

Leaves of Grass

The rustic yet dignified figure looking back at you from this page is Walt Whitman, as depicted in the frontispiece portrait of his collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855. Special Collections possesses three copies of this first edition, which the author produced and marketed himself. Each of these copies shows variants which suggest the tur-moil of Whitman's process of self-publication. In addition, Special Collections has a number of the subsequent early editions of this work, which had a profound influence on the course of American letters.

Whitman was an unlikely figure to loom so large on the landscape of 19th-century American literature. Born in 1819 on Long Island to parents with Dutch and English ancestry, Whitman's first years were spent on the family farm, but when Walt was twelve his father moved to Brooklyn, N.Y., to try to improve the family fortunes. After a public school education, Whitman was apprenticed to the printing trade.

Not only did this trade provide him with a liveli-

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hood, but proximity to New York City increased his opportunities for self-education by giving him an opportunity to see plays, particularly Shakespeare, and to hear music, particularly opera. He also spent many hours walking the streets of the city, observing the life around him. In addition to learning to be a printer, Whitman taught for a while in country schools, and wrote as a journalist – mostly popular and sentimental poems and stories with little if any literary merit.

Thus the appearance of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, containing Whitman's experiments in a new style of poetry, was a bright flash on the literary scene. It attracted the praise of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and was reprinted frequently, with the regular addition of new poems. A good portion of the attention, and controversy, focused on the work's relative sexual frankness, as well as its directness and simple language, both novelties in the Victorian world.

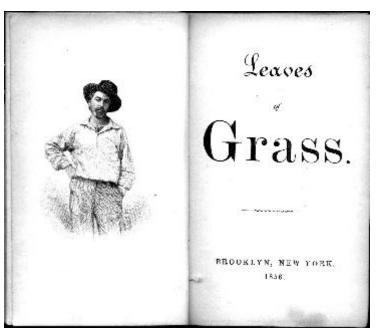
The first edition, like the second edition of 1856 bears no publisher's imprint, simply the location: "Brooklyn, New York." Its format is unusually large, being nearly 11½ inches tall. The fact that the introduction is in two columns on each page suggests Whitman's proximity to newspaper printing. The poems themselves are printed rather crudely in single lines, as shown in the illustration on the re-verse, lower right.

The second edition was a good deal smaller in format, and in spite of the anonymity of the imprint, had a New York distributor, Fowler & Wells. As he did with some issues of the first edition, Whitman included a section of reviews at the back of the volume. He even included Emerson's comment to the author, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career," on the spine of the volume.

Special Collections has two copies of the third edition, each representing a particular set of publishing circumstances. At this point the Boston firm of Thayer and Eldridge took over publication, producing an edition with the rather unusual calligraphic title page shown on the reverse upper right.

Shortly thereafter the firm failed, and the printing plates for this edition eventually came into the hands of another publisher, who continued to produce unauthorized reprints even as late as the 1880s. Special Collections also has a copy of this printing, which bears no clue as to its true origin.

Along with these significant early editions, Special Collections has a number of others, including the



fourth edition, New York, 1867, the fifth, Washington, D.C., 1871, and other Washington and Philadelphia editions.

Presently Special Collections is investigating the possibility of using these works, and other publica-

Slaves of CRASS.

Boston.
Thayer and Eldridge,
Year 85 of The States.
(1860-61)

tions by and about Walt Whitman, as a nucleus for collecting materials which will shed light on Whitman as a poet and the profound influence he has had on American literature.

—P.A.M.

Special Collections materials are available for research and consultation without restriction. For further information contact Philip A. Metzger, Curator of Special Collections, or Ilhan Citak, Special Collections Assistant. Reading room hours are Monday through Friday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. or by appointment. Telephone: (610) 758-4506; fax (610) 758-6091; e-mail: inspc@lehigh.edu

upper left: title and frontispiece of second edition
lower left: title page of third edition, unauthorized
reprint

lower right: page [57] of the first edition

Leaves of Grass.

COME closer to me,

Push close my lovers and take the best I possess,
Yield closer and closer and give me the best you possess.

This is unfinished business with mo . . . how is it with you? I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us.

I page so poorly with paper and types I must page with the contact of bodies and souls.

I do not thank you for liking me on I am, and liking the touch of mo I know that it is good for you to do so.

Were all educations practical and enumerated well displayed out of me, what would

it amount to?

Were I as the head tracher or charitable proprietor or wise statesman, what would

it autount to?

Were I to you as the best employing and paying you, would that satisfy you?

The learned and virtuous and benegolent, and the usual terms;

A man like me, and never the usual terms.

Neither a servant nor a master am \boldsymbol{I}_{t}

I take no socour a large price that a small price I will have my own whoever only a me.

I will be even with you, and you shall be even with me.

If you are a workretn or workwoman I stand as high as the nighest that works in the same sheet.

If you bestow gifts on your brother or dearest friend, I demand us good as your brother or demost friend,

If your lover or hisband or wife is welcome by day as a ghr, I must be personally us welcome: