

ON THE BACK COVER:

WHITMAN'S SKETCHES FOR THE SPINE OF THE 1856 EDITION—The MS fragment on the back cover (courtesy of the Feinberg Collection, Library of Congress) is Whitman's attempt to visualize for himself what the spine of his 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* might look like if he used a key phrase from Emerson's famous 1855 letter to him. On the whole complicated Whitman-Emerson relationship at this time the best recent treatment is Jerome Loving's *Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), but Loving was unaware of these spine drawings so could not work out their implications. In fact, few people have been aware of these drawings, which appear on the back of one of the 110 MS sheets that make up *An American Primer*, Whitman's most important commentary on poetic language. Printed versions of these sheets are available for study in William White, ed., *Daybooks and Notebooks* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 3:728–757, and White mentions that there is a "Drawing of spine on verso" of sheet #4, but he offers no description of it and no suggestion about what this drawing really represents.

Whitman probably gave up work on *An American Primer* sometime in early 1856 and decided to devote full attention to *Leaves*. We must remember that the first edition of *Leaves* was a poetic success but a colossal publishing failure—and thus the remote cause of these book-spine sketches. Without the assistance of banner reviews and public attention, the July 1855 venture seemed likely to be the last as well as the first edition. A dozen or so purchases out of the seven or eight hundred printed volumes would seem a crushing disappointment. But not to Whitman. He may have been disappointed but by no means crushed. It is that quality of his character that biographers have always challenged themselves to explain. It can be explained but only by acknowledging that Whitman was something less than a gentleman. Neal Bowers has a lively little book, *Poet as Pitchman* (1985), detailing James Dickey's assorted maneuvers to attract attention to his poetry, but Whitman's comparable (and worse) tricks and deceptions would require a substantial volume.

Whitman knew *Leaves* was major poetry, knew it would prove itself if he could only get his projected audience to read it, so he determined to get its attention. He was not callous or cruel or criminal, but he certainly was not above cutting a few corners. Remember he was half Yankee—the Whitmans were from Connecticut. He might have played the "gentleman," accepted with equanimity the failure (except for Emerson's letter) of the first edition, and kept the hurt to himself. But instead, with canny and sometimes ruthless manipulation, he set up his own promotional campaign. If the critics wouldn't write the reviews the book needed to draw the audience, he would concoct some anonymous reviews himself. If showing the Emerson letter to journalist acquaintances was too slow, he would get Charles Dana, editor of Greeley's *Tribune*, to print it in the paper. If shocked critics and reviewers blasted him for crudity, lasciviousness, indelicacy, he would print the juiciest parts of such reviews for publicity value. He even thought of taking advantage of the Lyceum fervor, and imagined that after his performance he would sell copies of *Leaves* to the crowd; accordingly he wrote up some advertising posters proclaiming his prowess and availability—but there were no takers.

He then did the opposite of giving up: he put out a second edition. That, too, would need a little controversy to catch attention, so he planned to print Emerson's

letter at the back of this 1856 edition and answer it in an open "Dear Master" reply in which he would explain his poetic program. Did he tell Emerson of this plan and ask his permission? Of course not.

But, still, prospective readers would have to pick up the book and leaf through it before getting committed, so he would need something on the spine to catch the viewer's eye. Turning over a page of his abandoned *American Primer* manuscript, he made the sketches we now have. In pencil, he made two parallel drawings. He folded the slip to make two narrow columns, simulating the spine of a book. The wavy slant line across the two entries is a printer's signal indicating "finished." Both designs are done in minute detail and with elaborate care, particularly the right-hand one with its simulated roots and fronds for the letters of "Grass," with the separation between the title and his name signaled by those bunched wavy lines indicating grass, and with the three-leaf design below his name. All of this clearly indicates that the use of the Emerson sentence was no sudden whim occurring at the printer's, but a premeditated act, another of that series of promotional ventures which continue in some form or other for the rest of Whitman's career. The photographs of Whitman collected in this issue can be read at least in part as another aspect of that lifelong self-advertisement. As scholars and readers of poetry we no longer subscribe to that critical "must" of the genteel period in which one must be a *good* (i.e., saintly) man to write good (i.e., acceptable) poetry. Rather, we should acknowledge Whitman's craftiness and check its relation to the poet's craft in his use of language and rhetoric.

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