MARTIN TUPPER, WALT WHITMAN, AND THE EARLY REVIEWS OF *LEAVES OF GRASS*

MATT COHEN

IN 1856, A REVIEWER in the London *Examiner* responded to the challenge of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* with the following characterization:

> We can describe him perfectly by a few suppositions. Suppose that Mr Tupper had been brought up to the business of an auctioneer, then banished to the backwoods, compelled to live for a long time as a backwoodsman, and thus contracting a passion for the reading of Emerson and Carlyle? Suppose him maddened by this course of reading, and fancying himself not only an Emerson but a Carlyle and an American Shakespeare to boot when the fits come on, and putting forth his notion of that combination in his own self-satisfied way, and in his own wonderful cadences? In that state he would write a book exactly like Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.[1]

Between 1856 and 1860, eight reviews, seven of them from England, mention Martin Farquhar Tupper (1810-1889) in connection with Whitman. This essay analyzes divergences and connections between Tupper and Whitman by situating them within the literary squabbles of their day and specifically discusses what the English reviewers of *Leaves of Grass* hoped to gain from bringing up Tupper in a review of Walt Whitman.[2] I am interested both in understanding the contemporary response to Whitman and the implications that the Whitman-Tupper connection has for our understanding of the broader relationship between politics and literary form.

Martin Tupper was one of the best-selling authors of nineteenth-century Anglo-America.[3] The absence of international copyright helped make him popular with both the public and publishers in the United States, since his editions could be produced and bought at lower cost than similar domestic publications like gift books or collections of religious poetry. His occasional poems, too, were pirated by American newspapers and published widely.[4] There is no doubt that Whitman knew who Tupper was; Whitman's personal copy of Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy*, with some passages marked in blue pencil, can be found in the Rare Books Room of the Library of Congress.[5] Working as sometime-editor for New York newspapers at the time of Tupper's peak popularity, Whitman might have published some of Tupper's poetry, and he

certainly reviewed him, calling him "one of the rare men of the time."[6] It is unlikely, however, that the two poets ever met. For one thing, they traveled in very different circles; Tupper was a lifelong friend of Gladstone, had dinner at the White House (with Millard Fillmore), corresponded with Zachary Taylor, attended twice at the Royal Court, and knew the Astors, among many other wealthy and powerful people. Whitman, of course, never traveled overseas and distanced himself from the elite social and literary life that Tupper embraced.

The two men also had substantial ideological differences.[7] Tupper was a Tory and an Evangelical Protestant, and his chief objective in poetry was to promote religion. Had he not had a serious stammer, he would have taken orders and vented most of his eloquence in the pulpit. Whitman's rejection of hierarchical social structure and orthodox religion represented a fundamental challenge to Tupper's world-view. Tupper would have disliked Whitman even before *Leaves of Grass*, however, since Whitman's republican appreciation of the democratic world of print was as much a part of his journalism as it would later be of his poetry. Of the American press in 1851, Tupper wrote, "If it were not for the immoral state of the swarming petty papers, I really believe England and America might coalesce; as it is, the lower orders here are kept in a state of exasperation against everything English—or are attempted to be so" (Hudson, 119). Whitman and his contemporaries were attempting to construct a republic of print, a widespread distribution of information considered necessary to the functioning of democracy on a large scale. Tupper, however, in this comment makes an explicit connection between literary hierarchies and popular politics—a well-structured literary marketplace leads to a well-ordered kingdom. Such a comment also suggests that Tupper would have seen Whitman's poetry and his social vision as intertwined; as writer for the "petty papers" and as democratic poet, Whitman was one of the "immoral" writers who kept trying to convince the "lower orders" that the English class structure (and hierarchy more generally) was a bad idea.

Whitman's reaction to Tupper's ideological orientation is suggested by his comment that "the poetry of England, by the many rich geniuses of that wonderful little island, has grown out of the facts of the English race, the monarchy and aristocracy prominent over the rest, and conforms to the spirit of them." Here he describes Martin Farquhar Tupper, Esq., D.C.L., F.R.S. of Christchurch, Oxford, as well as he describes Lord Tennyson, the ostensible subject of Whitman's comment.[8] Tupper's occasional attempts to bridge this ideological gap are exemplified by a stanza from his poem "The Anglo-Saxon Race":

Englishmen everywhere! brethren all!
By one great name on your millions I call,—
Norman, American, Gael, and Celt,

Into this fine mixed mass ye melt,
And all of the best of your best I trace
In the golden brass of the Saxon Race![9]

Tupper's popularity in America was in part due to his efforts to reconcile the two countries (particularly difficult since Charles Dickens's opinions on America had just been published); the terms on which he based that reconciliation are clear in this poem and in many of Tupper's other poems. As Neil Horsman has shown, by the late 1840s and early 1850s, the concept of racial Anglo-Saxonism was well developed enough in the United States to serve as a philosophical and rhetorical bridge for those English people who embraced the new country's potential.[10] Although Whitman's opinions on race fluctuated during his life, his rejection of the kind of spirit of English aristocracy pervading Tupper's nationalistic poetry did not.

Whitman's consideration of Tupper on the whole, though, cannot be reduced to simple ideological rejection. As Kenneth Price points out, Whitman employed the tactics and themes of many poets whose work he considered unacceptable on the whole. Whitman once commented that "all kinds of light reading, novels, newspapers, gossip etc., serve as manure for the few great productions, and are indispensable or perhaps are premises to something better." Price notes that "this observation is telling, for it accurately describes Whitman's ability to use what he does not necessarily accept."[11] Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy* and some of his other poems may well have served as premises (Tupper's critics would have preferred "manure") for Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.[12]

Solomon's proverbs were the model for *Proverbial Philosophy*, which is written in free verse. This style forms the most obvious link (and the one most often metioned by reviewers) between Tupper and Whitman; Whitman saw that Tupper's innovation might be used in his own hands to help break down class barriers within literature. Tupper never called *Proverbial Philosophy* poetry; he called it "rhythmics," a distinction Whitman would not have made. As for content, *Proverbial Philosophy* consists of unrelenting moralizing, maxim after memorable maxim. Some of the content of Tupper's other poetry, however, might have caught Whitman's eye in spite of its more standard form. "Are You a Great Reader?", whose title evokes Whitman's challenge, "Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?", concludes with some Whitman-like language, although it is in rhymed pentameter:

I am untamed, a spirit free and fleet,
  That cannot brook the studious yoke, nor be
Like some dull grazing ox without a soul,
  But feeling racer's shoes upon my feet
Before my teacher starts, I touch the goal.[13]

Despite the resonances in this passage, though, in Whitman's poetics the "spirit free and fleet" becomes a universal characteristic, embracing and hence altering the trope of the "dull grazing ox." In "To Think of Time," he writes, "I swear I think now that every thing without exception has an eternal soul! / The trees have, rooted in the ground! the weeds of the sea have! the animals!" Whitman directly attacks the commonplace poetic evocation of the "dumb, driven cattle," overturning popular pith in extremely conversational terms. In Section 13 of "Song of Myself," Whitman parries Tupper's ox with:

> Oxen that rattle the yoke and chain or halt in the leafy
> shade, what is that you express in your eyes?
> It seems to me more than all the print I have read in my
> life.

Here Whitman completes the inversion of poetical commonplace by placing the world of print itself in a less valuable position than the appreciation of animal expression. Whitman might also have found Tupper's fragment, with its studied breaking of the "studious yoke," a little disingenuous coming from an Oxford graduate with a law degree. A line from Tupper's "Thus Far" also reminds one of Whitman's "Here the frailest leaves of me" (from "Calamus"): "Thus far: a few of my less faulty flowers / Dropt on the highway for the passers-by."[14] For the most part, when Whitman's lines resonate with Tupper's, they function as a critique of the poetic commonplaces that are interrogated throughout *Leaves of Grass*.

Certainly, then, reviewers of *Leaves of Grass* had formal reasons for comparing the two writers. The fact that the two writers had pronounced political differences, however, suggests at least two things. On one hand, there is a curious irony in the fact that Whitman's famous formal innovations, now seemingly the inevitable poetics of a democratic bard, may have been shaped by the success of an aristocratic aspiring poet laureate. While Whitman may have recognized in Tupper's free verse an opportunity to harmonize democratic politics with free poetic form, he might have been just as inspired by *Proverbial Philosophy*'s incredible popularity in the States. Certainly the use of similar form for different ideological ends suggests that there is no necessary connection between politics and form. Tupper's invisibility today may be due to modern critical taste, but at the time he was a best-seller. Even if the formal similarities between the two writers cried out for attention, the question remains, what drove so many reviewers to refer to Tupper when describing Whitman's poetry? If it was not comparative politics that formal similarities evoked, what use was it to discuss together these writers who differed so profoundly?

For one thing, the formal freedom common to the two writers conveyed egotism to reviewers. If there was a poetical attitude shared by

Tupper and Whitman it was tremendous self-confidence. Whitman always relied on his strong poetic personality as an exponent of democratic literature; Martin Tupper's glibly self-confident persona made his poetry striking, memorable, and tendentious. The press exaggerated this quality in both poets. Tupper was constantly berated by the press (and by Hawthorne in his "English Note-Books") for his attitude of moral superiority and his solipsism, while Whitman's "egotism" was a main focus of many critics' ire. The *Examiner* review quoted above epitomizes this kind of criticism. What the critic is ostensibly saying is that Tupper influenced Whitman's form, while the Transcendentalists influenced his philosophy. The final comment, though, "in his own self-satisfied way, and in his own wonderful cadences," brings the formal issue and the tonal issue together. This happens again in the *Leader* review, "Transatlantic Latter-Day Poetry," which comments that the form of the poem, "almost unmetrical 'lengths,'" is reminiscent of Tupper, and then immediately complains, "It seems to resolve itself into an all-attracting egotism."[15] Certainly on one score, formal iconoclasm made reviewers' jobs difficult, since it required a critical vocabulary that was seldom invoked. Furthermore, a poet's decision to abandon the demands of traditional forms and structures smacked of disrespect for literary history and reminded critics of the formal license characterizing "low" literary culture. This point, though, begs the question of why Whitman was reviewed so frequently. For some periodicals there must have been more immediate benefits to be obtained by associating Whitman with Tupper.

For the more general English opinion on both Tupper and the early Whitman at the time, the *Westminster Review* may serve as one example. Discussing the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the reviewer writes, "In form these poems, if poems they can be called, are composed in irregular rhythmical lines, after the manner of Tupper, and in fact they may be described by the following equation,—as Tupper is to English Humdrum, so is Walt Whitman to the American Rowdy."[16] It would seem, then, that Tupper's defamation was a done deal to English reviewers. In fact, though, Tupper's sales in England did not decline substantially until 1865. Moreover, Tupper was still an active and producing part of the English literary landscape at the time—the twenty-fifth edition of *Proverbial Philosophy* came out at the end of 1856, with orders for 3600 copies anticipating it (Hudson 183).

Mentioning Tupper in a negative review of Walt Whitman (and all of the reviews of Whitman mentioning Tupper are mostly negative about both writers) was predominantly a political move for English reviewers. English periodicals like the *Critic*, the *Saturday Review*, and the *Athenaeum* (anathema to Tupper), were all trying to bring Tupper down at exactly the time Whitman's poetry began to appear in Britain. Tupper is used as a comparison so much because, for these English intellectual

journalists, it was a chance to bring down two "popular" artists at the same time. (Tupper was a favorite in Tory periodicals, which do not appear to have concerned themselves with Walt Whitman.) Hudson points out, for example, that the newly-founded *Saturday Review*—nicknamed the *Reviler* by Tupper—"represented the revolt of the intelligentsia against the bourgeoisie. While admitting the contributions of agnostics and free-thinkers, it had a special bias against Nonconformists and extreme Protestants of the Tupper school" (Hudson 183). To most of these papers, then, Whitman and Tupper, representing the worst of both worlds, were happily united by a coincidence of form. All but one of the English reviews were written between 1856 and 1860, the key years when these papers were solidifying their political and economic positions.[17]

This explains in part why no American papers at the time participated in the tandem derision of the two writers.[18] Tupper's social and political position were not factors in America, where he was still a publishing boon. Perhaps more importantly, Tupper was not a representative of the nascent literary culture of the United States. Walt Whitman's extraordinary conflation of self, nation and poetry provoked criticism, but Tupper was not a useful point of comparison for American reviewers. He praised the new country, but in the old style of apostrophic poetry, leaving out the roughs and in particular the slang. Tupper's tour of the States in 1876 was quite successful, but he undertook it in part because he could not make enough money on lecture tours in England.

Taking into consideration the politics of periodical publishing in Tupper's time also explains the fact that in English reviews, Tupper ceases to be of much interest after the early 1860s, while Whitman's status improves steadily. Tupper was easily contained, but new forces were emerging in England who helped change the contexts for Whitman; Walter Pater, William Michael Rossetti, Oscar Wilde, and the Rhymer's Club poets, who would dominate literary controversy at the century's end, were all rising by the 1870s. Whitman was of great interest to intellectuals like John Addington Symonds and writers like Wilde and Rossetti, who wrote reviews for English periodicals, finding in Whitman a poet whose approach to language freed them from the constraints that Tupper so heartily welcomed.[19]

In 1860 a reviewer sarcastically predicted that Whitman would survive for the same reason Tupper had, "on the principle, perhaps, of the quack, who calculated there were many more fools than wise men in the world."[20] By 1933, the *Oxford English Dictionary* could define the word "Tupperian" as "of, belonging to, or in the style of Martin F. Tupper's Proverbial Philosophy (1838-1842)." Tupper was no longer in print, but *Leaves of Grass* lived, through a varied reception history, as an object of academic study, as political inspiration, and as raw material for

other writers who have remade and reshaped Whitman—sometimes transforming him as completely as he transformed Tupper. Tupper unhitched philosophical poetry from the hierarchy of formalism that characterized English letters, making it legible to a wider audience, but he didn't press his advantage by also unseating the hierarchical social philosophy reinforced by that formalism. For Whitman, Tupper served as both example and foil, providing a less alienating medium for a more transgressive poetics. For the literary periodicals, on the other hand, the frequent mention of Tupper in reviews of Whitman went beyond mere artistic commentary, employing both authors to secure a larger socio-political position—an independent, professional intellectual community with cultural expertise and authority—for the reviewing periodicals, their editors, and readers. Commentators could try to contain Whitman's apparently radical politics of form by comparing *Leaves of Grass* to its ponderous, conservative predecessor. Ultimately, Whitman's rhetorical flexibility and the politics of reviewing would together do as much to affect the literary interest in Tupper and Whitman as would the "fools" among his readers.

College of William and Mary

NOTES

1 The reviews used in this essay are compiled in Kenneth M. Price, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, American Critical Archives 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See *Examiner* 2512 (March 22, 1856); Price, 42. The "Wild Tupper of the West" theme dominates this review's structure.

2 The anonymous American review that mentions Tupper does not deride him as do the English reviews, for reasons that are addressed later in this essay. Interestingly, though, Steven Olsen-Smith speculates that this review (of the 1856 edition, in the *New York Daily News* of 27 February 1856) may have been written by Thomas Powell, an Englishman (see Olsen-Smith, "Two Views of Whitman in 1856: The New York *Daily News* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* Reviews of *Leaves of Grass*," the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 13 [Spring 1996], 210-216).

3 Information on Tupper comes from Derek Hudson, *Martin Tupper: His Rise and Fall* (London: Constable, 1949). The only other monograph on Tupper is Ralf Buchmann, *Martin F. Tupper and the Victorian Middle-Class Mind* (Bern: Verlag Francke, 1941).

4 Tupper, on his two American tours of 1851 and 1876, saved newspaper clippings of his own works and all of his reviews, from which scrapbooks Hudson compiled his biography. Jospeh L. Coulombe has recently traced American reactions to Tupper's tour in detail, pointing out that Whitman's understanding of Tupper would have been inflected by newspaper coverage of Tupper's tour, not all of which was laudatory ("'To Destroy the Teacher': Whitman and Martin Farquhar Tupper's 1851 Trip to America," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 13 [Spring 1996], 199-209). Tupper appealed to Americans partly because of his evangelicalism—he became popular just after the Second Great Awakening. His maxims are also easy to remember and loaded with the kind of pathos ubiquitous in American magazine poetry of the time.

5 Both David Reynolds and Joseph Rubin have discussed Whitman's marking of a passage from "Of Recreation" celebrating nature's minutiae, "To learn the use in the beetle, and more than a beauty in the butterfly." It is difficult to know what a reader intends by marking passages in a book, but it is clear from Whitman's markings (on fourteen different pages of the book) that he was critically engaged with Tupper's text. For example, Whitman circled a passage from "Of Reading":

To have no avenue to heaven but the dim aisle of superstition:
To live as the Esquimaux, in lethargy; to die as the Mohawk in ignorance; . . .

It is as likely that Whitman was critical of the spiritual conservatism of this passage as that he might have seen iconoclastic possibilities in the notion of multiple avenues to heaven. These critics have also pointed out that the Bible and the works of James Macpherson and Samuel Warren were sources of inspiration for Whitman's formal innovations. Whitman's copy of Tupper is the 1838 edition published by Joseph Rickerby. See Rubin, "Tupper's Possible Influence on Whitman's Style," *American Notes and Queries* (October 1941), 101-102, and Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 316.

6 In the *Brooklyn Eagle*, February 20, 1847; *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, ed. Emory Holloway (1921; Glouscester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1972), 1:136.

7 Hudson says that Tupper "abominated" Whitman, but does not make clear whether he really hated the man or just his poetry.

8 "An English and American Poet," *American Phrenological Journal* 22 (October 1855); Price, 23. This is one of Whitman's own reviews of *Leaves of Grass*. Tupper shared Whitman's interest in phrenology.

9 Tupper, *The Complete Poetical Works* (New York: Hurst, 1891). There is no critical edition of Tupper's poetry, so dating this poem is difficult, but it was likely written between 1847 and 1851.

10 Neil Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

11 Kenneth M. Price, *Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 16.

12 Late in life, Whitman made fun of Tupper, though for purely artistic reasons. Horace Traubel reported that in an 1889 sermon, Minot Savage contrasted Shakespeare with Whitman and Tupper. Whitman's reaction was to ask, "Horace, what should you say of the critical faculty of a man who would class Tupper and Walt Whitman together?" While the question could be ironic rather than rhetorical, it represents a more explicit effort on Whitman's part (and of course Traubel's, for including this episode) to distance himself. Referring to himself, as Whitman often did, by his full name (instead of saying "me" or "myself") and Tupper by only his last, Whitman invokes the negative connotation already attached to Tupper's name and contrasts his own self-fashioned and implictly more legitimate aura, "Walt Whitman." See Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Vol. 5, ed. Gertrude Traubel (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 313.

13 Tupper, 209.

14 Tupper, 419.

15 *Leader* 7 (June 7, 1856); Price, 50.

16 *Westminster Review* 74, ns. 18 (October 1, 1860); Price, 107.

17 The one exception, as usual, is Henry James, whose 1865 review of *Drum-Taps* resurrects Tupper because of James's obsession with form. James writes, "Perhaps since the day of Mr. Tupper's *Philosophy* there has been no more difficult reading of the poetic sort. It exhibits the effort of an essentially prosaic mind to lift itself, by a prolonged muscular strain, into poetry" ("Mr. Walt Whitman," *Nation* 1 [November 16, 1865]; Price, 115).

18 Apart from James's review in 1865, no mention is made of Tupper in Whitman reviews until 1881, when Tupper's popularity in America had finally slacked off somewhat ("Walt Whitman's Poems," *Literary World* 12 [November 19, 1881]; Price, 225-227). The author of this review includes only one sentence about the formal similarity between Whitman and Tupper.

19 Wilde's review of Whitman's works is uncharacteristically unironic, questioning his choice of form, but praising his philosophy, ("The Gospel According to Walt Whitman," *Pall Mall Gazette* [January 25, 1889]; Price, 319-322). In 1884, William Michael Rossetti wrote to Edward Dowden about Dante Gabriel Rossetti's attitude toward Whitman: "He said to me more than once that Whitman is nothing but 'sublimated Tupper'; and seriously contended that Whitman must certainly have read Tupper's book before undertaking his own" (*Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti*, ed. Roger W. Peattie [University Park: Penn State University Press, 1990], 460). Algernon Swinburne's 1887 reconsideration of Whitman revives the Tupper-Whitman connection, a symptom of Swinburne's efforts to resituate his own poetry in the light of Whitman's increasing fame in England.

20 "Walt Whitman and His Critics," *Leader and Saturday Analyst* (June 30, 1860); Price, 91.