OSGOOD'S FOLLY: THE SIXTH EDITION OF *LEAVES OF GRASS*:

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When Writing about the sixth edition (1881) of *Leaves of Grass* in my biography of Walt Whitman, one of the facts of its suppression that surprised me, or jolted me out of my ignorance of the moment, was the extent to which the famous Boston publisher, James Ripley Osgood, was impractical and unrealistic. Osgood, whose firm had taken up the legacy of Ticknor and Fields, the famous Boston publishers of such New England literary saints as Emerson and Longfellow, was at the time he published Whitman on extremely shaky ground financially. I've learned since that he lost the right to publish the old Ticknor and Fields list through a failed partnership with Henry Houghton and was at the time starting over at establishing an impressive list of new writers. These included Whitman, Mark Twain, and George Washington Cable.[1]

This Boston publisher with an elite literary pedigree from his long association with Ticknor and Fields was in effect turning to three working-class writers who were already instrumental in the development of realism and the use of vernacular or local dialects. Whitman, of course, was the biggest risk to Osgood's reputation as a publisher of genteel literature. If he hadn't been so desperate for name-recognition authors, the publisher probably wouldn't have included the sixth edition on his new list, though I now also think he wouldn't have been shocked at or necessarily put off by Whitman's so-called "dirty poetry."

What I've also learned—and this fact has not been commented upon anywhere in print that I know—is that Osgood had been back in 1860 a fellow drinker with Whitman and Henry Clapp, the former editor of the defunct *Saturday Press*, at that Bohemian hangout known as Pfaff's Beer Cellar on Broadway. This was the year of the publication of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* by another Boston firm, Thayer and Eldridge, Whitman's first and only formal publisher of his poetry up to that time. The clue to this fact about Osgood is buried in the fifth volume of the prose works in the 1902 *Writings of Walt Whitman*. I came across a vague reference to it in a footnote in volume three of Whitman's *Correspondence*, where the earlier source is erroneously given as volume eight of the *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*.[2] Citing this first

collection of Whitman's works is a confusing endeavor anyway because their volume numbers run from one to seven for the *The Complete Prose Works of Walt Whitman* and then start over with new numbers for the three volumes entitled *Leaves of Grass*.

The correct source for the following quotation that forms the seed for this paper, a response from Osgood to Whitman's opening letter to the publisher about the publication of the sixth edition, is found in volume five of the *Prose Works*.[3] John Boyle O'Reilly, editor of a Boston journal called *The Pilot* and himself a colorful figure, had recommended Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to Osgood. Osgood had written the poet, who replied on the other side of a note O'Reilly had sent him. His letter to Osgood, which forewarned him that the sexual poems would have to be included in such an edition, has as its salutation "My dear Osgood" and not "Dear Sir," as the poet would have normally greeted someone whom he had not previously met in person.[4] Furthermore, it is unlikely that anybody—even Whitman—would have used the verso of another's letter to write to a prospective publisher he didn't already know personally, especially a Boston publisher as prominent as Osgood.

Ignoring Whitman's insistence on the inclusion of *all* the poems uncensored, Osgood asked the poet to send a printer's copy as soon as possible. There is no date on this letter as included in the 1902 writings; Whitman's letter is dated May 8, 1881. Osgood's only concern, it seems, was that the new edition would "supersede all other previously published volumes."[5] He was particularly concerned about fugitive copies of the 1860 edition by Thayer and Eldridge. Although Thayer and Eldridge had gone out of business through bankruptcy at the beginning of the Civil War, they had sold the plates to the 1860 edition, and they eventually fell into the hands of an unscrupulous New York publisher named Richard Worthington. He began issuing an essentially pirated edition of the third *Leaves of Grass* in 1879. During the 1880s he would sell over 10,000 copies. Yet in spite of Worthington's actions commencing in 1879, Whitman assured Osgood that the Worthington "matter [was] not of any moment."[6]

Whitman had visited Boston in April 1881 to give his Lincoln lecture for the third time. In closing his letter to Whitman, Osgood wrote: "I am sorry I was absent from Boston during your visit: I should have been glad to renew the acquaintance I had with you in the old Pfaff days." Osgood was twenty-four years old in 1860 and had been a clerk in the Boston publishing firm of Ticknor and Fields since 1855, the year of Whitman's first edition of *Leaves*. Unfortunately, there is no extant correspondence for Osgood for the first half of his life, according to his only biographer. Yet we do know that Ticknor and Fields frequently dispatched the young Osgood to New York to confer with New York publishers. 1860 was the year that William Dean Howells claimed that

he met Whitman at Pfaff's. Although Howells's assertion that he met Whitman at Pfaff's was challenged by William Winter, a drama critic who frequented the saloon at the time, it wouldn't have been strange for either Howells or Osgood, who was almost the same age as Howells, to venture into such a place. Pfaff's was the meeting and trysting place for actors, editors, poets, and reporters. William Swinton, the future editor of the *New York Times*, frequented the place. Other habitués included Adah Issacs Menken, Ada Clare, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich. During his own Bohemian stage in the later 1860s, Mark Twain went there.[7] It was at Pfaff's on Broadway in the rising publishing capital of New York that the new realists would congregate—working class writers whose writing background was mainly journalism.

If there is some doubt that Howells actually met Whitman at Pfaff's, it is now certain that young Osgood did. And as a clerk in a Boston publishing house he may have been impressed that Whitman was at the time being published by another Boston firm, even though Osgood would probably have considered Thayer and Eldridge radical upstarts in the business. Later, by the time Osgood had become almost as familiar with the New York publishing scene as he was with its Boston counterpart, he no doubt became aware of Whitman's rough edges. But then he was also trying to publish Twain, who had allegedly insulted the New England Brahmins with his speech at the 1877 Whittier Birthday dinner given by the *Atlantic Monthly*. Whitman's publication of the 1855 Emerson letter that greeted him "at the beginning of a great career" had probably been a more severe offense and may have discouraged the future publisher from dirtying his hands with Whitman. Yet, as his 1881 response to Whitman indicates, he knew the poet personally long before he published the first book that would become "banned in Boston." And now he was in desperate need of a listing of name authors. Both Whitman and Twain were outsiders who were in essence undermining Emersonian eloquence with the American vernacular.

All this may help to explain why Whitman was so rigid about the Boston District Attorney's attempts to censor the sixth edition of *Leaves of Grass*. He knew, or thought he knew, how much Osgood needed him. And knowing Osgood as a former Pfaffian who had mingled with the Bohemian literary crowd from which Whitman ultimately sprang, the poet may have suspected that the publisher harbored a personal admiration of his book. Accordingly, he initially showed no hesitancy in reminding Osgood from the outset that "the old pieces, the *sexuality* ones, about which the original row was started & kept up so long, are all remained, & must go in the same as ever." For his part, Whitman very much wanted to be published by a mainstream publisher, indeed the very same publisher who had issued some of Emerson's later titles. In a way, he may have romantically viewed his publication by the successor

of Ticknor and Fields as a kind of passing of the torch from Emerson to himself. After all, he had publicly addressed Emerson as "Master" in 1856, adding: "Those shores you found. I say you have led the States there—have led Me there."[8] As noted, his first Boston publisher hadn't been exactly mainstream but in fact idealists mainly interested in the abolitionist movement. In the same year they published the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, they also published William Douglas O'Connor's *Harrington*, a romance about the horrors of slavery in the deep South, and at least two titles exploiting the recent execution of John Brown.

So Whitman knew Osgood as someone who used to go to Pfaff's and so probably guessed that he was not naïve about the reputation of *Leaves of Grass*. It wasn't, as it has usually been portrayed, a case in which a fairly notorious poet approached a highbrow publisher in the hope that he wouldn't notice the public record of the book whose latest edition he was to publish. Because of their previous relationship, the poet could afford to be candid and even pushy. Admittedly, Whitman had tried to de-emphasize the risky poems, saying that they were ultimately the very early parts of what was now a cathedral of poems. Yet he said nothing more in their defense to the press. When the Boston D.A. struck with his objections, Whitman was willing to "make a revision & cancellation in the pages alluded to," thinking it "wouldn't be more than half a dozen" changes. The sixth edition was selling fairly well, and Osgood was willing to make adjustments to keep it in the stores, even though the book had been referred to as a "slop bucket" in the New York press. That's how desperate Osgood was in needing to sell books. Reluctantly, he finally told Whitman that his revisions to satisfy the District Attorney ought to include the total excision of "A Woman Waits for Me" and "To a Common Prostitute." He thought that this change would satisfy the DA. "If you consent to this we think the matter can be arranged without any other serious changes," Osgood wrote Whitman.[9] This statement sounds as though it comes from a publisher who is either still in cahoots with the author or one who is not sharing with Whitman all the information he has—that perhaps he had struck a deal with the DA and now had only to convince the poet. But these last items for the chopping block Whitman had agreed only to alter, not banish.

One would think that Osgood, fearful of ruining his reputation as a nationally known publisher, would have run from the situation at the first whiff of scandal. Yet not only was he familiar with Whitman's problem, not only was he in need of selling books, but having been in the company of the Pfaff's literary crowd at a younger age he probably wasn't, as I said, truly all that shocked at the allegedly offensive poems in *Leaves of Grass*. Osgood was, after all, at the same time arranging the publication of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881). This

romance—unlike *Huckleberry Finn*—would not get banned from the Concord Public Library, but the humorist, as he was rather exclusively known during the whole of his writing career, had only four years before—as I noted earlier—allegedly offended Emerson, Longfellow, and Holmes during his now infamous Whittier Birthday Speech. Comparing Emerson to a drunk in 1877 was in as much bad taste as Whitman's unauthorized publication of Emerson's letter in 1855 and indeed as the poet's open response to Emerson published in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Both of these vernacular artists, it appears, were doomed for censure in nineteenth-century America. Furthermore, in Whitman's case, this was 1882, not 1855 when the female body was still covered virtually from head to foot. The "Children of Adam" poems had been around now for over twenty years, giving the public plenty of time to get used to their sensual imagery. It was also the age of the Gibson Girls and "Daisy Millerism," set in motion by Henry James's novella in 1878. First rejected by *Lippincott's Magazine* in Philadelphia, no doubt because of its perceived assault of "American womanhood," "Daisy Miller" was published immediately by the *Cornhill Magazine* of London, where it ironically enhanced James's reputation as a novelist in America.[10] Now, in 1882, an expanded portrait of the American Daisy was being serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* under the title of *The Portrait of a Lady*.

The old literary values were giving way to the new age of realism and eventually naturalism. Twain would in a few years begin *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, a utopia that exploded into dystopia. This new view may not yet have included the lady or woman as Whitman's common prostitute or a woman waiting for a man to engage her in sexual intercourse. Yet change was coming, and Whitman's book had its defenders even in New England. Emerson had, of course, long ago placed his stamp of approval on the 1855 edition. Now Emerson was dead, passing away in the same year that *Leaves of Grass* was "banned in Boston," and soon Oliver Wendell Holmes in his role as Emerson's biographer would begin his task of putting Humpty Dumpty back together again, trying to play down Emerson's association with and appreciation of such literary infidels as Whitman and even Thoreau.[11]

Realism was the fashion now, not romanticism, and certainly not sentimentalism. In less than a decade it would all dissolve into the determinism of naturalism. Howells as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* until the winter of 1881 had championed realism over sentimentality. And Howells was a close associate of Osgood, who was never an out-of-date romanticist or transcendentalist. In fact, during part of the commotion over *Leaves of Grass* in the spring of 1882, he was desperately trying to save his firm by traveling incognito down the Mississippi River in the company of Mark Twain, who was trying to refresh his memory of the

river in order to complete *Life on the Mississippi*, the latter parts of which are examples of bitter, post-war realism. The pseudonyms that the two assumed were ostensibly to allow Twain, who was widely known, to avoid fanfare and thus obtain candid answers from postwar Mississippi steamboat pilots, but the scheme also allowed Osgood to move more furtively in a non-Brahmin literary world.

Whitman sensed the change in the literary mood of America and wanted his book to lead the way. Ever since O'Connor's spirited defense of *Leaves of Grass* in *The Good Gray Poet* (1866), it had been the poet's intent to keep his book in the news. In 1876 he concocted a scheme in the *West Jersey Press* that started an Anglo-American war of the critics over Whitman's shabby treatment in America. O'Connor had weighed in again for his friend with a long, fire-breathing essay in the *New York Tribune* entitled "Walt Whitman: Is He Persecuted?" Six years later he wrote another diatribe to the newspaper that damned Osgood for abandoning *Leaves of Grass*. Perhaps having been told by Whitman that the publisher had once been an old drinking companion, he put his attack in the context of a betrayal and reminded Osgood and Company that it had agreed to an unexpurgated edition of Whitman's book and should have stood its ground when the Boston District Attorney first challenged the publication on the grounds of its failure to satisfy the demands of the evening lamp. Instead, he concluded, "they meanly break their contract . . . , abandon the author . . . , and drop from the ranks of the great publishers into a category of hucksters whose business cannot afford a conscience."[12] Yet Osgood had tried—if only to save his business—to be a literary pioneer by publishing Whitman's book until it was nearly becoming a criminal offense to do so. Ultimately, he backed away from *Leaves of Grass*, but the book's Boston "banning" set it irresistibly on the path to becoming the nation's most influential collection of poetry. Indeed, not only was Whitman's book one of the main inspirations for realism and possibly the naturalist movement with poems like "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," but his work, especially the poem once called "A Child's Reminiscence" ("Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"), anticipated the psychological naturalism of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919).

This is how progress is made. America never willingly freed its slaves; the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 was originally a ploy, a dangled threat to the Confederate States to force them to lay down their arms and return to the Union. Theodore Dreiser's groundbreaking *Sister Carrie* in 1900 was not willingly issued by its publishers; yet it changed American literature in terms of its dependence upon Victorian sentiment. And Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* never achieved universal acceptance in the poet's lifetime, only in ours when its challenge to American

puritanism is probably no longer necessary. Its life for a quarter century between the first and the sixth editions was one of repeated turbulence. In 1855 critics had declared it obscene and obtuse. In 1856 it had been virtually ignored. In 1860 it had been discouraged by Emerson, its champion in 1855. In 1867, aside from its supplements, *Leaves of Grass* had grown by only a few poems that reflected its author's physical and emotional exhaustion after a long and deadly war. In 1872 it was forced to divide in order to attempt to conquer. Finally in 1882 it achieved national fame only by being "banned in Boston." But it was a book with nine lives, or at least six editions, that would ultimately be rolled into one gigantic collection called *Leaves of Grass*, a title Whitman might have wisely considered abandoning after its turbulent maiden voyage in 1855 in order to give his next edition a fresh chance of success. Today, we know it as a book that can never be tamed into a definitive edition. That's the book we really celebrate in 2005, not merely the one first published 150 years ago. And its triumph today was ironically brought about by a Bostonian whose name was *not* Emerson.

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NOTES

1 Carl J. Webber, *The Rise and Fall of James Ripley Osgood* (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1959), 176-182.

2 *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 3:225, n. 96.

3 *The Complete Prose Works of Walt Whitman*, volume 5, in *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke, Thomas B. Harned, and Horace L. Traubel (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1902), 276-277.

4 *Correspondence*, 3:224-225.

5 *Prose Works*, 5:277.

6 *Correspondence* 3226; the Worthington matter is discussed in detail in *Correspondence* 3:196, n. 81, and in Joel Myerson, *Walt Whitman: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), 37-38.

7 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 235; and *Mark Twain-Howells Letters*, ed. Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1960), 1:330n.

8 *Correspondence* 3:224; and *Leaves of Grass: Reader's Comprehensive Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 739.

9 *Correspondence* 3:267, 271, n. 24; and *Complete Prose Works of Walt Whitman*, 5:295.

10 Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 216.

11 Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884).

12 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman's Champion: William Douglas O'Connor* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1978), 129.