

“THE INDICATIONS” (1857): AN EARLY WHITMAN IMITATION



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ONE MEASURE OF THE EARLY INFLUENCE of *Leaves of Grass* is the speed with which it generated parody. Following the appearance of the first edition in 1855, newspaper poets and editors quickly began to poke fun at the hallmarks of Whitman’s mature verse: his long free-verse line, his wide-ranging vocabulary, his cosmic-democratic subject matter, and his ostensible egotism. Within a decade, Whitman parodies would become something of a staple of American newspaper culture, with comic take-offs appearing in periodicals as diverse as *Puck*, the *New York Saturday Press*, the *London Mirror*, the *New York Tribune*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Punch*, and the *Century*.¹ The rise of Whitman parody poems in the 1860s was, as Gay Wilson Allen notes, a clear “indication that Walt Whitman was gaining notoriety,” but his deeper impact on poetry would not be obvious for some time.² Indeed, the earliest poetry that is traditionally agreed to exhibit Whitmanian influence is Adah Isaacs Menken’s *Infelicia* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1868), a posthumous collection of the American actress’s poems, many of them written in a vibrant, Whitmanesque free verse; the more general impact of Whitman’s poetics, of course, would not be apparent until the early twentieth century.³ However, I have located a non-parodic Whitman imitation that pre-dates Menken’s earliest free-verse by several years. It is called “The Indications,” and it appeared in the June 3, 1857 issue of *Life Illustrated* magazine (New York: Fowler and Wells).

There are a number of interesting things to note about the poem (see Figure 1). Most notably, “The Indications” appears in a periodical with which Whitman was intimately connected. Its proprietors and editors, phrenologists Lorenzo N. Fowler and Orson S. Fowler, were Whitman’s friends, and they and their brother-in-law Samuel R. Wells had by 1857 done a great deal to promote the early editions of *Leaves of Grass*, from publishing one of its earliest reviews in *Life Illustrated* (July 28, 1855), to selling the first edition in their Manhattan storefront, to financing the publication of the disastrous second edition. Perhaps as a favor to the poet, they also irregularly published Whitman’s prose journalism in *Life Illustrated* between 1855 and 1858, the

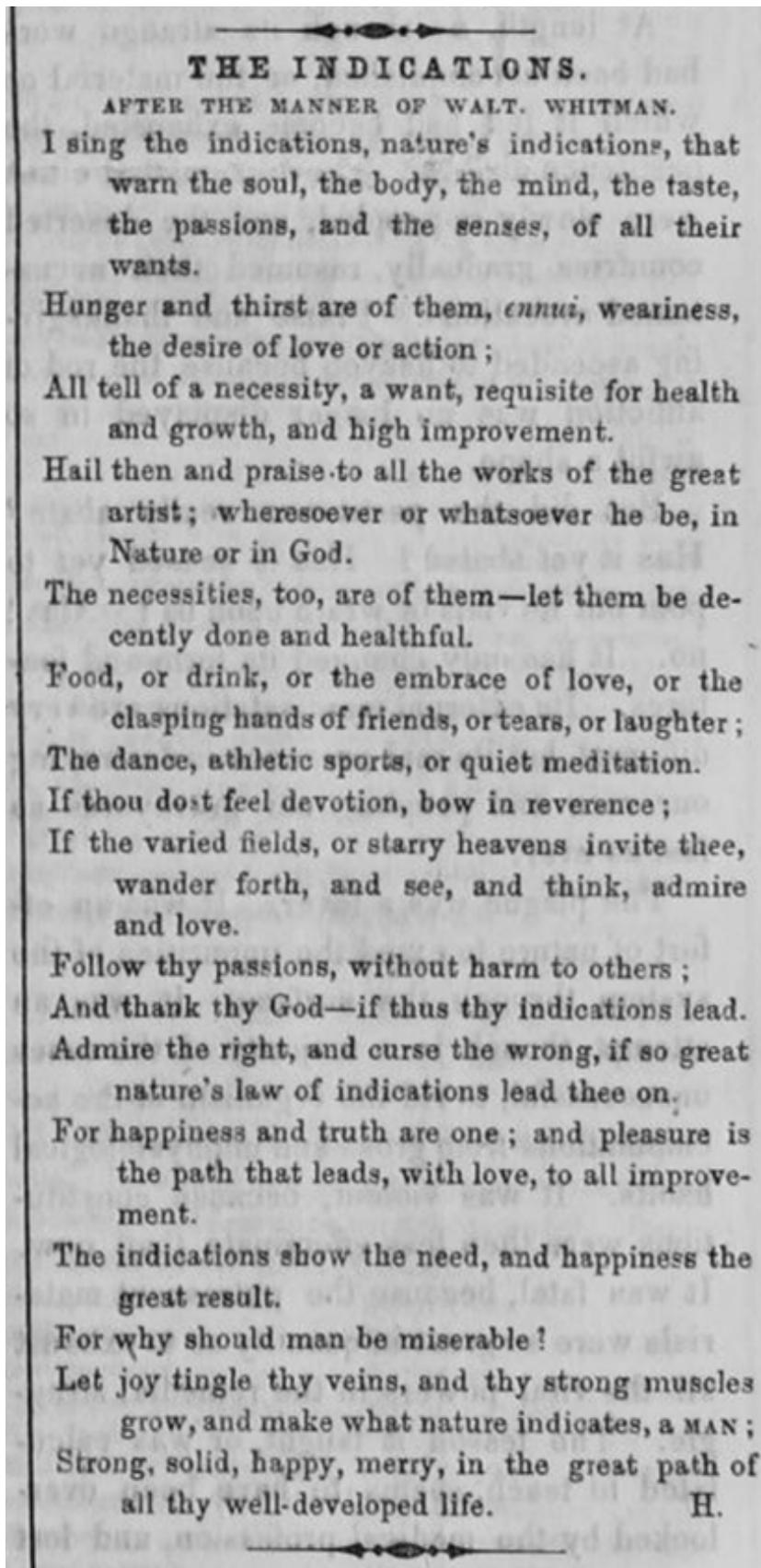


Figure 1: "The Indications." *Life Illustrated* (June 3, 1857).

most prominent example being his unsigned “New York Dissected” series. No known examples of Whitman’s writings have been found in *Life Illustrated* for 1857, though “The Indications”—written “AFTER THE MANNER OF WALT. WHITMAN”—might arguably have issued from the poet’s own pen.

There are several reasons to consider the possibility. First, the poem is an exceedingly capable imitation of Whitman’s unique style and pet subjects; whether sincere or parodic, most nineteenth-century take-offs of Whitman’s poetry land wide of the mark. “The Indications,” on the other hand, accurately features a number of Whitman’s stylistic trademarks, including his fondness for French words (“*ennui*”) and his use of the phrase “I sing.” (The latter is particularly curious, since Whitman does not substantially adopt the anaphoric use of “I sing” until 1860.) Second, the poem’s topics are believably Whitmanian: nature, happiness, physical desire, athleticism, a loose and syncretic spirituality, and the personal determination of meaning. And lastly, Whitman does title one of his own poems “The Indications,” in the fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1871-72).

That said, I think the verses in *Life Illustrated* are likelier a careful imitation of Whitman than Whitman’s own work. For one thing, beyond the title itself there is no apparent relation between “The Indications” in *Life Illustrated* and Whitman’s later poem of the same name. For another, even considering Whitman’s lifelong fondness for Quaker “plain speech” and the English of the King James Bible, he entirely avoids words like “thee,” “thy,” and “thou” in the first few editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Their earliest appearance is in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (1865); only later, in Whitman’s more traditional, late-life poems, would he use such words more liberally, as in “Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood,” “What Best I See in Thee,” “Today and Thee,” “Prayer of Columbus,” and so on. Furthermore, the rather fussy use of a period to abbreviate Whitman’s given name in the byline—“WALT. WHITMAN”—is something that the poet himself never did. And of course, the *Life Illustrated* poem is signed “H.” Though he ghostwrote a handful of the earliest reviews of *Leaves of Grass*, I know of no instance in which Whitman published a pseudonymous work “after the manner” of himself, presumably to imply his own growing influence—though I would not put such a strategy past him.

In all likelihood, “The Indications” is simply a perceptive and well wrought early imitation of Whitman’s poetry, possibly written by (and certainly published by) someone who knew Whitman personally. Even taking into account its appearance in a periodical linked to Whitman, the existence of this early and impressive imitation suggests a need to reimagine the arc of Whitman’s

poetic influence. It is not inaccurate to say that his stylistic impact was largely posthumous, evident in the poetry of (and often openly acknowledged by) early twentieth-century modernists, yet early imitations like “The Indications” suggest that Whitman’s overt influence may have begun far earlier, in periodical poetries that are only now coming to light.

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Notes

- 1 For an early sampling of Whitman parodies, see Henry S. Saunders’ compilation of *Parodies on Walt Whitman* (New York: American Library Service, 1923). More recent discussions of comic Whitman imitations include Joseph Andriano’s entry on “Parodies” in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 505-506; and Amanda Gailey’s “Walt Whitman and the King of Bohemia: The Poet in the *Saturday Press*,” *WWQR* 25 (2008), 143-166. *WWQR* has reprinted a number of little-known Whitman parodies, including “An Unknown Whitman Parody” found by W. T. Bandy, in *WWQR* 2 (1985), 45-46; and “The ‘Strong Man’ at Dartmouth College: Two Uncollected Parodies of Whitman’s ‘As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free’” located by Todd Richardson, in *WWQR* 18 (2000), 81-84.
- 2 Quoted in *Walt Whitman Birthplace Bulletin* 1.1 (1957), 11.
- 3 For more on Whitman’s nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reception and cultural influence, see the primary sourcebook *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, 3rd edition, ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion (Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 2019).