

**LINCOLN AND WHITMAN:  
THE POETIC IMAGINERS OF US**

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## Background

When I was a boy of ten years in 1964, I became very interested in the Civil War after I received a book for Christmas titled *The American Heritage Illustrated History of the Civil War*, with many photographs and maps and a text by the Civil War historian Bruce Catton. I wore out that book. The spine ended up broken and pages loose.

There were two photographs from that book of Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) staring at one another on facing pages. The first was Lincoln in 1860 when he was clean-shaven, before he became president. The second photograph from the spring of 1865, a few days before his assassination, shows a worn and exhausted Lincoln with a sparse beard and a distant gaze. It was only five years later, but it seemed like decades had landed on that face. My admiration and interest in Lincoln came from looking closely at those two photographs.

When I was ten years old, I didn't know a thing about the poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892). I'm not sure I had ever heard his name or seen any of the numerous photographs of him. At some point as a child, I read or heard the first section of Whitman's poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," but I didn't know Whitman's subject was Abraham Lincoln, nor did I know of the intense devotion Whitman had for Lincoln. This is what I heard or read:

*When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,  
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,  
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.*

*Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,  
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,  
And thought of him I love.<sup>1</sup>*

In high school, I became very interested in poetry and Whitman, and I learned of his love for the fallen president, and his appreciation of Lincoln as a figure of suffering, good sense, humor, endurance—all the qualities that make Lincoln the essential American. Whitman fully understood Lincoln's importance in our national journey within a day of Lincoln's death in April 1865:

*He leaves for America's history and biography, so far, not only its most dramatic reminiscence—he leaves, in my opinion, the greatest, best, most characteristic, artistic, moral personality. Not but that he had faults, and show'd them in the Presidency; but honesty, goodness, shrewdness, conscience, and (a new virtue, unknown to other lands, and hardly yet really known here, but the foundation and tie of all, as the future will grandly develop,) UNIONISM, in its truest and amplest sense, form'd the hard-pan of his character. These he seal'd with his life.<sup>2</sup>*

Whitman's understanding of the future importance of Lincoln is prescient. We should not be surprised that Whitman was so insightful about the significance of Lincoln. Years before he even knew of Lincoln or who would be the next president, he had anticipated Lincoln's characteristics in a political tract from 1856, entitled "The Eighteenth Presidency!" Whitman

called upon the next president to come out of "the real West, the log hut, the clearing, the woods, the prairie, the hillside."<sup>3</sup> Whitman seemed to identify Lincoln, saying he would be pleased "to see some heroic, shrewd, fully-informed, healthy-bodied, middle-aged, beard-faced American blacksmith or boatman come down from the West across the Alleghenies, and walk into the Presidency, dressed in a clean suit of working attire, and with the tan all over his face, breast, and arms."<sup>4</sup>

My talk today on the parallels and connections between Lincoln and Whitman has been generated and influenced by a wonderful book published in 2004, *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington*, by Daniel Mark Epstein.<sup>5</sup> The most interesting theory that Mr. Epstein advances in his book is that Lincoln may have read the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in his law office in Springfield in 1857. Mr. Epstein concludes that Lincoln was influenced by Whitman's new poetic style—allowing Lincoln to compose the great imaginative work of his presidency—The Gettysburg Address and The Second Inaugural Address.

I am not sure that the evidence can take us to a direct influence by Whitman on Lincoln, but I think we find in Lincoln and Whitman so many similarities in background, disposition, and attitude that it should not be surprising that their voices would overlap. Lincoln and Whitman were both poets by nature, deeply engaged in the imaginative process, specifically imagining the future and us. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman addresses the future reader with intimacy, directness and a kind of projected love. Lincoln, in his greatest literary efforts—The Gettysburg Address and The Second Inaugural—and in his steadfast support of the concept of the Union—directly and closely contemplates us and our future as a country.

For both Lincoln and Whitman, the ability to see the future was an exercise in poetic imagination. The same poetic imagination allowed Lincoln and Whitman to create themselves, their work, and to reach out to us across the generations.

### **Lincoln As a Poet**

Lincoln was a published poet and a deep lover and reader of poetry. We know that Lincoln loved to read poetry out loud and did so regularly, sometimes to the annoyance of his law partner, William Herndon. Herndon writes in his biography of Lincoln:

*Singularly enough Lincoln never read any other way but aloud.  
The habit used to annoy me almost beyond the point of endurance.  
I once asked him why he did so. This was his explanation: "When  
I read aloud two senses catch the idea: first, I see what I read;  
second, I hear it, and therefore I can remember it better."<sup>6</sup>*

A recently-discovered anonymous poem from *The Sangamo Journal* published in 1838 and entitled "The Suicide's Soliloquy," has been attributed by some scholars to Lincoln.<sup>7</sup> The poem is premised as a suicide note found in the deep wood near the bones of a man.

## THE SUICIDE'S SOLILOQUY

*The following lines were said to have been found  
near the bones of a man supposed to have committed  
suicide, in a deep forest, on the Flat Branch of the  
Sangamon, some time ago.*

*Here, where the lonely hooting owl  
Sends forth his midnight moans,  
Fierce wolves shall o'er my carcase growl,  
Or buzzards pick my bones.*

*No fellow-man shall learn my fate,  
Or where my ashes lie;  
Unless by beasts drawn round their bait,  
or by the ravens' cry.*

*Yes! I've resolved the deed to do,  
And this the place to do it:  
This heart I'll rush a dagger through,  
Though I in hell should rue it!*

*Hell! What is hell to one like me  
Who pleasures never know;  
By friends consigned to misery,  
By hope deserted too?*

*To ease me of this power to think,  
That through my bosom raves,  
I'll headlong leap from hell's high brink,  
And wallow in its waves.*

*Though devils yell, and burning chains  
May waken long regret;  
Their frightful screams and piercing pains,  
Will help me to forget.*

*Yes! I'm prepared, through endless night,  
To take that fiery berth!  
Think not with tales of hell to fright  
Me, who am damn'd on earth!*

*Sweet steel! Come forth from out your sheath,  
And glist'ning, speak your powers;  
Rip up the organs of my breath,  
And draw my blood in showers!*

*I strike! It quivers in that heart  
Which drive me to this end;  
I draw and kiss the bloody dart,  
My last—my only friend!*<sup>8</sup>

In 1846, Lincoln wrote and published in *The Quincy Whig* a poem entitled "My Childhood Home I See Again." He wrote this poem after visiting his former home in Indiana on a campaign trip for Henry Clay in 1844. Like "The Suicide's Soliloquy," "My Childhood Home" is extremely bleak and melancholic as can be sensed from the conclusion of the poem:

*I hear the loved survivors tell  
How nought from death could save,  
Till every sound appears a knell,  
And every spot a grave.*

*I range the fields with pensive tread,  
And pace the hollow rooms,  
And feel (companion of the dead)  
I'm living in the tombs.*<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his life, with its many tragedies and struggles, Lincoln was drawn to poetry for solace. His favorite poem, which he had committed to memory and would regularly recite, was by William Knox and entitled "Mortality." Lincoln wrote: "I would give all I am worth, and go into debt, to be able to write so fine a piece as I think that is."<sup>10</sup> Lincoln was familiar with the poetry of Edgar Allen Poe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>11</sup> Lincoln's own efforts as a poet in the 1830s and 1840s are all melancholic, formal, and finally, not very memorable. In another wonderful recent book on Lincoln, writer Joshua Wolf Shenk argues that Lincoln's regular melancholy was in fact clinical depression and that his condition ultimately fueled his greatness.<sup>12</sup>

### **Whitman's Poetry Before *Leaves of Grass*, 1855**

Before his self-publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Whitman had written and published conventionally rhymed and formal verse of a melancholic nature very similar to Lincoln's. It was with *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 that Whitman found his true and lasting voice in sprawling free verse, covering the continent, imagining himself everywhere, and addressing the future and us. Whitman also caused a scandal in the literary world with his forthright acceptance of sexuality and his own enthusiasm with the body and sensuality.

### **Did Lincoln Read *Leaves of Grass* in 1857?**

Mr. Epstein's position that Lincoln read *Leaves of Grass* in 1857 and was influenced by it is based on the recollections of Henry B. Rankin (1837-1927) who was a clerk in the Lincoln & Herndon law office in Springfield. Mr. Rankin's book, *Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln*, was published by G. P. Putnam's Sons in 1916. I think this recollection by Rankin is important enough to quote at length:

Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass, then just published, I recall as one of the few new books of poetry that interested him, and which, after reading aloud a dozen or more pages in his amusing way, he took home with him. He brought it back the next morning, laying it on Bateman's table and remarking in a grim way that he "had barely saved it from being purified in fire by the women."

Readers of this day hardly comprehend the shock Whitman's first book gave the public. Lincoln, from the first, appreciated Whitman's peculiar poetic genius, but he lamented his rude, coarse naturalness.

When Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass was first published it was placed on the office table by Herndon. It had been read by several of us and, one day, discussions hot and extreme had sprung up between office students and Mr. Herndon concerning its poetic merit, in which Dr. Bateman engaged with us, having entered from his adjoining office. Later, quite a surprise occurred when we found that the Whitman poetry, and our discussions had been engaging Lincoln's silent attention. After the rest of us had finished our criticism of some peculiar verses and of Whitman in general, as well as of each other's literary taste and morals in particular, and had resumed our usual duties or had departed, Lincoln, who during the criticisms had been apparently in the unapproachable depths of one of his glum moods of meditative silence—referred to elsewhere—took up Leaves of Grass for his first reading of it.

After half an hour or more devoted to it he turned back to the first pages, and to our general surprise, began to read aloud. Other office work was discontinued by us while he read with sympathetic emphasis verse after verse. His rendering revealed a charm of new life in Whitman's versification. Save for a few comments on some broad allusions that Lincoln suggested could have been veiled, or left out, he commended the new poet's verses for their virility, freshness, unconventional sentiments and unique forms of expression, and claimed that Whitman gave promise of a new school of poetry. At his request, the book was left by Herndon on the office table. Time and again when Lincoln came in, or was leaving, he would pick it up as if to glance at it for only a moment, but instead he would often settle down in a chair and never stop without reading aloud such verses or pages as he fancied. His estimate of the poetry differed from any brought out in the office discussions. He foretold correctly the place the future would assign to Whitman's poems, and that Leaves of Grass would be followed by other and greater work. A few years later, immediately following the tragedy of Lincoln's assassination,

*Whitman wrote the immortal elegy, "O Captain! My Captain!" which became the nation's—aye, the world's—funeral dirge of our First American. When I first read this requiem its thrilling lines revived in my memory that quiet afternoon in the Springfield law office, and Lincoln's first reading and comments on Leaves of Grass. That scene was so vividly recalled then as to become more firmly fixed in my memory than any other of the incidents at the Lincoln and Herndon office, and this is my apology for giving space for rehearsing it so fully here.<sup>13</sup>*

Rankin's account was criticized by some Lincoln biographers at the time who questioned Rankin's long silence. Why had Rankin waited so long to report on Lincoln's interest in Walt Whitman? In considering Rankin's recollection, I think we should ask "What reason would Rankin have to lie about this memory, given its detail and consistency with what we know from others of Lincoln?"

I believe Rankin's account. First, we know that Lincoln was very interested in poetry and regularly read it aloud in the office. Second, there is nothing in Rankin's account that is self-aggrandizing. Rankin does not even indicate whether he agreed with Lincoln's assessment of the value of Whitman's poetry. Third, the detail about Lincoln saving the book from being "purified in fire by the women" sounds like something Lincoln could say. Finally, the detail about Lincoln's reading of the beginning of Leaves of Grass "revealing a charm of new life in Whitman's versification" seems a recollection that could not be invented.

Just imagine, Lincoln, in his high-pitched, Kentucky-born twang, reading Leaves of Grass at its very beginning:

*I celebrate myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

*I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease...observing a spear of summer grass.*

We can imagine Lincoln being attracted by these lines. Lincoln himself was a great loafer from boyhood on. We all know the stories of him reading a book under a tree or while he was plowing. His own father considered Lincoln lazy. It is clear from his biography and his diligent efforts at self-creation, that Lincoln was industrious about protecting his own access to reverie and daydream. In some ways, this is a poet's full-time occupation—protecting that part of one's life that allows for poetry, insight, and long vision. Both Lincoln and Whitman possessed and protected this ability.

### **Lincoln and Whitman in Washington**

There is no evidence that Lincoln and Whitman ever formally met one another. Had this occurred, Whitman most certainly would have written of it in correspondence or in his journals,

portions of which he later published in *Specimen Days*. Whitman lived in Washington on and off from late 1862 until 1865. He first came to Washington to search for his younger brother George who was reported to have been wounded in the Battle of Fredricksburg in December 1862. George sustained only a minor wound. Over the next several years, Whitman tended to wounded soldiers in various hospitals in and around Washington. He also unsuccessfully sought governmental employment through the offices of Salmon Chase, Secretary of the Treasury, William Seward, Secretary of State, and Charles Sumner, senator from Massachusetts.<sup>14</sup>

Sometime in the summer of 1863, Whitman undertook the very deliberate mission of stationing himself at various corners in Washington where he knew the President was likely to pass on his way to the summer White House at the Soldier's Home, north of the City. Whitman writes about these encounters in some detail in *Specimen Days*. Whitman was always a flamboyant dresser and with his long beard and hair and wide-brimmed hat, he must have created a memorable impression for Lincoln. Whitman himself seemed to view his sometimes daily greeting of the President as part of his general mission to minister to the sick and wounded:

*I see the President almost every day, as I happen to live where he passes to or from his lodgings out of town...I see very plainly ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S dark brown face, with the deep-cut lines, the eyes, always to me with a deep latent sadness in the expression. We have got so that we exchange bows, and very cordial ones...They pass'd me once very close, and I saw the President in the face full, as they were moving slowly, and his look, though abstracted, happen'd to be directed steadily in my eye. He bow'd and smiled, but far beneath his smile I noticed well the expression I have alluded to. None of the artists or pictures have caught the deep, though subtle and indirect expression of this man's face. There is something else there. One of the great portrait painters of two or three centuries ago is needed.*<sup>15</sup>

In the fall of 1863, Whitman had his picture taken by Alexander Gardner, the famous battlefield photographer who had a studio in Washington. That same day he was invited to the White House by Lincoln's secretary, John Hay. Hay knew of Whitman as a poet and through his acquaintance with William and Nellie O'Connor with whom Whitman boarded. John Hay was certainly aware of and had met Whitman at least once in Washington. Hay had offered Whitman his assistance in obtaining a furlough and roundtrip ticket to New York so Whitman could return to vote. On Halloween 1863, Whitman posed for his picture at Gardner's gallery and then walked over to the White House to meet Hay. Outside the President's office, Hay gave Whitman the tickets while Whitman watched the President a few feet away and "saw Mr. Lincoln standing, talking with a gentleman, apparently a dear friend—his face & manner having an expression & were inexpressibly sweet—one hand on his friends shoulder the other holding his hand." The following day, Whitman wrote in his journal "I love the President personally."<sup>16</sup>

This is the final close encounter between Lincoln and Whitman. It's almost as if Whitman was magnetically drawn to the President having anticipated him as a savior of the country even before he was aware of him. Also, the evidence seems to suggest that Lincoln was both aware of Whitman and also perhaps wary of him because of Whitman's notoriety and the

scandal associated with Whitman's poetry. Whitman could certainly have met Lincoln that day with John Hay, but he hesitated. There was no other opportunity for Whitman to meet Lincoln.

### **Did Whitman's Poetry Influence Lincoln?**

The literary critic Harold Bloom has made a theory out of literary influences in his book *The Anxiety of Influence* where he advances the position that writers react to their elders and their peers by avoiding direct acknowledgment or influence.<sup>17</sup> Tracing literary influences or avoidances is a largely speculative game. We do know that Lincoln had a huge capacity to be influenced by his reading. He was steeped in Shakespeare and the Bible, as was Whitman. He read poetry out loud, not only because he enjoyed it, but because reciting was a further way to commit the text to memory.

I have no doubt that Lincoln was influenced by Whitman's new free verse voice. Rankin witnesses not just a passing interest by Lincoln in Whitman and *Leaves of Grass*, but an ongoing and persistent interest, as Lincoln picked up and put down the book regularly, and even took it home with him.

While Lincoln might not have acknowledged Whitman's influence, given the scandal Whitman created with *Leaves of Grass*, I think the influence can be felt in the simple eloquence of The Gettysburg Address and The Second Inaugural.

### **How Did Whitman and Lincoln Imagine Us?**

Whitman still speaks directly to us in *Leaves of Grass*:

*Closer yet I approach you,  
What thought you had of me know,  
I had as much of you—  
I laid my stores in advance,  
I considered long and seriously  
of you before you were born.*<sup>18</sup>

He is insistent, direct, and true in his approach to us:

*It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,  
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever  
so many generations hence,  
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,  
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a  
crowd,  
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river, and the  
bright flow, I was refresh'd,  
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the  
swift current, I stood yet was hurried,  
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the*

*thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.*<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Lincoln had the poetic and imaginative ability to project himself into the future by simple and direct language:

*It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*<sup>20</sup>

In the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln imagines the work ahead following the devastation of the Civil War in simple and domestic responsibilities. In his direct and evocative way, Lincoln sets out the course of action for the country:

*With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.*<sup>21</sup>

These are the words of a gifted poet—a man who had suffered greatly in his single term as president—a man who turned to poetry for comfort and insight and to ease his own melancholy, and in some way to survive.

As Americans and as poets or lovers of poetry, we find ourselves still in the aftermath of Lincoln and Whitman. We live in a world they imagined for us—Lincoln through his devotion to preserving the Union—Whitman through his compelling, tender and believable devotion to us.

I leave you with Whitman's direct address to us as living performers in the arts, both literary and political:

*Poets to Come*

*Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!  
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,  
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater  
than before known,  
Arouse! for you must justify me.*

*I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,  
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the  
darkness.*

*I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping,  
turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,  
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,  
Expecting the main things from you.*<sup>22</sup>

What expectations each of these great Americans had for us. We have not yet proceeded beyond their long vision.

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<sup>1</sup> Whitman, Walt, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York, New York: The Library of America, 1982) at 459.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 763.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 1308.

<sup>5</sup> Epstein, Daniel Mark, *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington* (New York: Random House, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Herndon, William, *The Life of Lincoln* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1949) at 268.

<sup>7</sup> The poem "The Suicide's Soliloquy" was published in the August 25, 1838 issue of the *Sangamo Journal*. See Presidents as Poets in the Library of Congress website: <http://www.loc.gov/rp/program/bib/prespoetry/al.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Abraham Lincoln Association Newsletter, Spring 2004*, (Springfield, Illinois: Abraham Lincoln Association, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953) at 367-70, 378-79, 385-86.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at vol. 1, 378.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at vol. 1, 377.

<sup>12</sup> Shenk, Joshua Wolf, *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness*, (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Rankin, Henry B., *Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln*. (New York, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1916).

<sup>14</sup> See generally, *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington*, Daniel Mark Epstein, (New York: New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), 76-95, 123-143.

<sup>15</sup> Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1982) at 732-34.

<sup>16</sup> Epstein at 174-180.

<sup>17</sup> Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* at 311.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 308-09.

<sup>20</sup> Lincoln, Abraham, *Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865* (New York, New York: The Library of America, 1989) at 536.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 687.

<sup>22</sup> Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* at 175.