



The Poet Who Reviewed Himself

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Walt Whitman was not your average poet. In the 1850s, a respectable American poet was expected to write in tidy rhymes and steady rhythms, preferably about something polite. Walt wrote long, rolling lines that didn't rhyme at all. He wrote about workers and farmers, crowds and cities, his own body and soul. He thought poetry should sound like America itself, big and

noisy and a little bit untamed.

There was only one problem: nobody was going to publish that.

So Walt did it himself. And then he went a few steps further than anyone might have expected.

A Book With No Name on It

Walt lived in Brooklyn and had spent years working in newspapers and print shops. He knew his way around a press. For his book of poems, he went to a shop run by two Scottish immigrants, the Rome brothers, whom he had known since the 1840s.

Walt paid for the printing himself. He also did much of the typesetting with his own hands, arranging the little metal letters one by one.

The book was called "Leaves of Grass," and it came out on July 4, 1855. About 800 copies were printed.

Here is the odd part. The author's name did not appear on the title page. Neither did a publisher's name. Instead, at the front of the book, there was an engraved picture of a bearded man in work clothes and a jaunty hat. The reader was left to figure out that this fellow was the poet.

Sales were few. America did not quite know what to make of him.

Writing His Own Reviews

A less determined poet might have waited quietly for the critics to come around. Walt did not wait.

In 1855, he wrote reviews of his own book, without signing them, and got them printed in at least three publications: the United States Review, the American Phrenological Journal, and the Brooklyn Daily Eagle.

As you might expect, these reviews were very, very positive. The one in the United States Review opened with a joyful shout: "An American bard at last!"

Walt was, of course, describing himself.

The trick did not stay secret forever. A writer named William Swinton, reviewing the next edition of the book for The New York Times, recognized Walt's hand in those three anonymous reviews. And according to the Whitman scholar Ivan Marki, the self-reviews did not help sales much anyway.

The Letter From Concord

Walt also did something more sensible. He sent copies of his book to well-known writers. One of them went to Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the most celebrated thinkers in America at the time.

Emerson read it, and he loved it.

On July 21, 1855, Emerson wrote Walt a letter. He called the book the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom America had yet produced. And he wrote a line that would follow Walt for the rest of his life: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career."

Today the Library of Congress holds that letter. It has been called perhaps the most important letter in American literary history.

Walt was thrilled. So thrilled, in fact, that he did not keep it to himself. Without asking Emerson's permission, he let the letter be printed in the New York Tribune, and it was also printed as a broadside.

When the second edition of "Leaves of Grass" came out in 1856, Walt went further still. He had Emerson's words, "I Greet You at the Beginning of a Great Career," stamped in gold on the spine of the book, right where every bookshop browser would see it.

Emerson was not pleased to find his personal letter made public and turned into an advertisement.

A Lifetime of Leaves

Walt never stopped working on "Leaves of Grass." For the rest of his life, he kept revising it, adding new poems, and publishing new editions. The thin first edition of 1855 grew into a thick book that is now one of the most important collections of poetry in American history.

The poet whose name was missing from his own title page became one of the most famous names in American literature.

What We Can Learn From a Poet

Some of Walt's methods are not ones we should copy. Writing glowing reviews of your own book and sneaking them into magazines is not a good idea, and it is much easier to get caught today than it was in 1855.

But underneath the mischief was something worth admiring. Walt believed in his poems so completely that he set the type himself, paid for the printing himself, and then made sure the right people saw the book. When the most respected writer in America finally said yes, Walt made certain everybody heard about it.

So if you believe in your work, take a lesson from Walt, but maybe not every lesson. Do the hard work yourself if you have to. Send your book to the people whose opinion matters. And when someone important finally greets you at the beginning of a great career, it is perfectly all right to be thrilled. Just ask before you print their letter.

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