

**AN AMERICAN PRIMER
WITH FACSIMILES OF THE
ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649324699

An American Primer with facsimiles of the original manuscript by Walt Whitman

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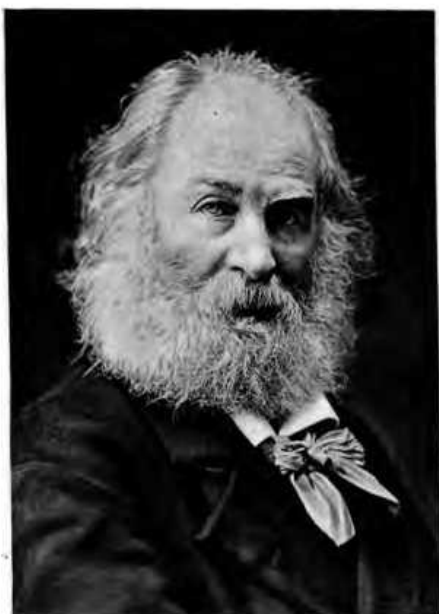
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AN
AMERICAN PRIMER
BY WALT WHITMAN

WITH FACSIMILES OF
THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

EDITED BY
HORACE TRAUBEL



BOSTON
SMALL, MAYNARD & COMPANY
MCMIV

FOREWORD

The American Primer is a challenge rather than a finished fight. We find Whitman on this occasion rather laying his plans than undertaking to perfect them. It would be unfair to take such a mass of more or less disjointed notes and pass them under severe review. Whitman never intended them for publication. He should not be criticised, as he has been by certain American editors, for an act for which he is in no way responsible. The Primer is not a dogma. It is an interrogation. Even as a dogma something might be said for it. As a question it intimates its own answer. One of Whitman's remarks about it was this: "It does not suggest the invention but describes the growth of an American English enjoying a distinct identity." Whitman would every now and then get on his financial uppers. Then he would say: "I guess I will be driven to the lecture field in spite of myself." The Primer was one of his projected lecture themes. The lecture idea had possessed him most convincingly in the period that antedated our personal acquaintance. Leaves of Grass appeared

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before I was born. When I got really into contact with Whitman the fight was on in full fury. "The Leaves has always meant fight to the world. It never meant fight to me." That was what Whitman said of it. He would make a point of my youth. "You bring young blood to the field. We are veterans—we welcome you."

Whitman at different times, especially in the beginning, when he struck up his rebel note, planned for all sorts of literary ventures which were not consummated. Whitman was undoubtedly convinced that he had a mission. This conviction never assumed fanatic forms. Whitman was the most catholic man who ever thought he had a mission. But he did regard himself as such a depository. Yet he never believed or contended that he possessed exclusive powers or an extraordinary divination. He felt that if the message with which he was entrusted did not get out through him it would get out through some other. But in his earlier career, after he tired of writing in the formal way and to the formal effect—for he played the usual juvenile part in literary mimicry—he felt that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to secure publishers either for his detail work

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or for his books. He often asked himself: How am I to deliver my goods? He once decided that he would lecture. And he told me that when the idea of The American Primer originally came to him it was for a lecture. Yet these notes in themselves were only fragments. He never looked upon them as furnishing more than a start. "They might make the material for a good talk," he said. "It's only a sketch-piece anyhow," he said again: "a few rough touches here and there, not rounding up the theme—rather showing what may be made of it. I often think the Leaves themselves are much the same sort of thing: a passage way to something rather than a thing in itself concluded: not the best that might be done but the best it is necessary to do for the present, to break the ground."

Whitman wrote at this Primer in the early fifties. And there is evidence that he made brief additions to it from time to time in the ten years that followed. The most of the manuscript notes are scribbled on sheets of various tints improvised from the paper covers used on the unbound copies of the 1855 edition. There is later paper and later handwriting. But the notes were largely

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written in the rather exciting five years before the war. "That stretch of time after 1855 until 1861 was crowded with personal as well as political preparations for war." But after he had issued the first edition of Leaves of Grass, and after he found the book surviving into the 1856 and 1860 editions, some of his old plans, this lecture scheme among them, were abandoned. The Primer was thenceforth, as a distinct project, held in abeyance. I remember that in the late eighties he said to me: "I may yet bring the Primer out." And when I laughed incredulously he added: "Well, I guess you are right to laugh: I suppose I never shall. And the best of the Primer stuff has no doubt leaked into my other work." It is indeed true that Whitman gave expression to the substance of the Primer in one way or another. Even some of its sentences are utilized here and there in his prose and verse volumes.

In referring to the Primer upon another occasion, Whitman said: "This subject of language interests me — interests me: I never quite get it out of my mind. I sometimes think the Leaves is only a language experiment — that it is an attempt to give the spirit, the body, the man, new words, new potential-