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Classic Book Notes #134

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"I see great things in baseball. It's our game – the American game."
Walt Whitman & Baseball

Editor's note: Following is a Book Notes Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth. It was first published as Book Notes #134 ("Baseball & Walt Whitman") in March 2023.

It's March, and there is madness in the air!

Okay, that's another sport.

But it is March, and that means spring and that means baseball's *Spring Training*, the return of warmth (or its promise), and a renewal of hope in better things to come. *Spring Training* is a lot like new student orientation on a college campus. No one has started throwing curveballs or giving tests; although the curveballs and tests will come, for the nonce everyone is a winner.

In prepping for my presentation this evening at the Jefferson Educational Society on ***Sporting America: "Americans and Their Games****** two things happened. I got a bit behind on my weekly ***Book Notes***, but I discovered Lowell Folsom's wonderful article for ***The Iowa Review***. In "America's 'Hurrah Game': Baseball and Walt Whitman," Folsom says, "Whitman, growing up with the sport, eventually came to see baseball as an essential metaphor for America". [1] By which I think Folsom meant that Whitman saw in baseball the tangible reality of the image of the protean, inclusive America he sang about in "I Hear America Singing."

So, I thought we'd revisit a ***Book Note Classic – Book Note #6 Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of Walt Whitman,*** but first some notes on Whitman and baseball.

Growing up in Brooklyn in the early 19th century, Whitman played earlier versions of baseball. His brother George observed that although Walt didn't particularly like sports, he played baseball. The earliest versions of baseball differed between the "Boston Game", sometimes called "Town Ball" and the "New York Game." The Boston Game was closer in technique and spirit to what we would call slow pitch softball in which the pitcher serves a "hittable" ball to the batter. In the "New York" game, which after the Civil War became the American game, the pitcher sought to deceive the hitter by throwing overhand and faster and attempting to make the ball dart and dip (i.e., "curve"). Whitman enjoyed the "Boston Game" as a young man. Later as an older man living in Camden, New Jersey across from Philadelphia, he rued the rise of the speed-balling pitcher. [2]

The middle picture above features the 1865 Brooklyn Atlantics, one of the last great purely amateur (in theory) teams before the rise of professional baseball with the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings. The young Whitman was a reporter for ***The Brooklyn Eagle***. As Matt Monagan reports in CUT4 by MLB.com, "in June,1858 (Whitman) moonlighted as a baseball beat reporter for the ***Brooklyn Daily Times***." In his report on the game, he wrote "The game played yesterday afternoon between the Atlantic and Putnam Clubs, on the grounds of the latter club, was one of the finest and most exciting games we ever witnessed. The

Atlantics beat their opponents by four runs…" [3] Some of those *Atlantics* were still around after the Civil War on the 1865 team pictured above. If you're interested, you can find the entire 1858 article at John Thorn's baseball history site at Walt Whitman, Baseball Reporter | by John Thorn | Our Game (mlblogs.com)

The most famous Whitman quote about baseball is at the center of a small controversy. In the 1988 film ***Bull Durham***, Susan Sarandon's character, Annie Savoy, ends the film (spoiler alert!) with an aside aimed directly at the audience. Annie says, "Walt Whitman once said, 'I see great things in baseball. It's our game, the American game. It will repair our losses and be a blessing to us'. You could look it up." [4]

In a 2012 article in the ***Los Angeles Times***, writer Brian Cronin alleged that Annie misquoted Whitman. [5] To which I say: Yes, and no. Yes, she did not quote him precisely, but taking a bit of license made his point more emphatic by collapsing several of his phrases into a single comment. I don't think the old jock Whitman would have argued with her. In fact, I think he would have found Annie's concision spot on.

Whitman's comments about baseball are largely from his days as a reporter noted above, random comments about "base ball" (two words) in ***Leaves of Grass***, and in a multi-volume record of Whitman's conversations with Horace Traubel, a friend of Whitman's from his Camden days. After Whitman's death, Traubel was his literary executor. Here is what Traubel says Whitman said about baseball:

> …base-ball is our game: the American game: I connect it with our national character. Sports take people out of doors, get them filled with oxygen generate some of the brutal customs (so-called brutal customs) which, after all, tend to habituate people to a necessary physical stoicism. We are some ways a dyspeptic, nervous set: anything which will repair such losses may be regarded as a blessing to the race. We want to go out and howl, swear, run, jump, wrestle, even fight, if only by so doing we may improve the guts of the people: the guts, vile as guts are, divine as guts are! (from volume two of Horace L. Traubel ***With Walt Whitman in Camden***.) [6]

Later Whitman made the following observation about baseball:

> Baseball is the hurrah game of the republic! That's beautiful: the hurrah game! well—it's our game: that's the chief fact in connection with it: America's game: has the snap, go, fling, of the American atmosphere… (from volume four of Horace L. Traubel ***With Walt Whitman in Camden.***) [7]

After stirring up a minor faux controversy, Cronin gets it right when he says the quote is true and the paraphrase of what Whitman said accurate. So, yes, maybe screenwriter Rob Shelton through Annie took some liberties, but they got it right.

Whitman saw baseball as the American game, the "hurrah game" that celebrated America's drive and that is an integral thread in the tapestry of American possibilities.

What else did Whitman get right about America. For that, let's turn to ***Book Notes #6*** and the poetry of Walt Whitman.

And remember, *Play Ball!*

Classic Book Notes #6
Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman was Woody Guthrie before Woody Guthrie; Walt Whitman was Bob Dylan before Bob Dylan; as Lavelle Porter suggested [1] Walt Whitman was a Jay-Z or Nas before there were gangsta-rappers when he wrote in the *"Preface"* to ***Leaves of Grass*** "the gangs of the kosmos and prophets. . . shall arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth," [p. 25], for "...they are the voice and exposition of liberty." [p. 17]

Walt Whitman was a bad-boy poet, artist, rock star before there were bad-boy poets, artists, rock stars!

So, why Walt Whitman? Why now?

In our tribalistic age, as an antidote to our fracturing into ever narrower groupings of stunted, nativist clans, there has been a resurgence of interest in Walt Whitman's vision of a multiplicitous, democratic, ever-becoming America.

In 2011, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend remarked, "What's stunning is his democratic sensibility. He loves everyone . . . He embraced the soul of democracy, its fundamental faith in humankind." [2]

David Brooks noted in 2003, "(A) cosmic optimism pervades the essay. . ." [3] Brooks was specifically referring to Whitman's ***Democratic Vistas***, a sprawling, boisterous celebration of America's democratic spirit, but it applies to all of Whitman's work. He exuded a deep faith not only in himself, but in humanity in general and America in particular.

As Whitman said in the *"Preface"* to the 1855 version of ***Leaves of Grass,*** "(T)he United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." [p.5] Anticipating Douglass' "*The Composite Nation*" by 14 years and my ***The American Tapestry Project*** by 165 years, Whitman proclaims "(H)ere is not merely a nation, but a nation of nations." [p.5]

America is composed of all the world has to offer. As a composition, it is a work of art -- specifically, a poem. A poem requires a poet. Echoing Shelley's ***Defence of Poetry*** (1840) [4], Whitman asserts that poets (read *artists*, generally) are the unacknowledged legislators of American culture.

As such, America needs great poets (*artists*), for "(A) great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as a man and a man as much as woman." [p. 24]

America is for everyone. It is not for this or that sect or tribe or group or race, but for everyone. Whitman anticipates my ***The American Tapestry Project's*** ever expanding ***"We"*** in *"We the People. . ."* when he announces,

America belongs to everyone, for as Whitman chants in ***Leaves of Grass***,

> "The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred
> . . . it is no matter who,
> Is it a slave? Is it one of the dullfaced immigrants just landed on the wharf?
>
> "Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off
> . . . just as much as you,
> Each has his or her place in the procession." [p. 122]

Whitman asserts we are all in this together, this creating of America, this writing of the American poem – you and me, you and yours, one and all, all of us making one out of many. "Human beings are meaning-making creatures," Ed Simon said last December in a ***New York Times*** article about Whitman and democracy. [5] In ***The American Tapestry Project's*** many potential plot lines, if you will, we can choose the limiting, 'blood and soil' vision of our incipient native authoritarians, or we can choose the expansive, humanity embracing vision of the better angels of our nature.

The former is a limiting vision, a frightened vision of our future coming from those who would bunker down and exclude. The latter, Whitman's vision, which

is the vision of America's founding and of those who, like Lincoln, want it to be of, for, and by the people is an expansive, a brave vision of a future embracing America, like in the old Army ad, 'becoming all it can be.'

An America embracing its foundational values of liberty, equality, and opportunity. For, as Whitman understood,

Thought

> "Of Equality – as if it harm'd me, giving others the same
> chances and rights as myself – as if it were not
> indispensable to my own rights that others possess the
> same." [p. 414]

Because we are all Americans, because we are all engaged in the weaving of ***the American Tapestry***, there can be no strangers; listen to Whitman:

To You

> "Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me, why should
> you not .....speak to me?
> And why should I not speak to you?" [p. 175]

In addition to Whitman's profound understanding of America's role as the apostle of democracy, there are many other reasons why he merits revisiting. In an earlier ***Book Notes***, we looked into the poetry of Mary Oliver and Jack Gilbert helping us be *present-to-the-present*, a longish way of saying they reminded us of the need to be mindful. They reminded us of the need to pause from our daily distractions to, like Pascal, sit quietly alone in a room and be *present-to-the-present*.

From ***Song of Myself***, Whitman on meditating, listening to your breath and being *present-to-the-present*:

"Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, nor music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of our valved voice." [p. 192]

Or, from 1855's ***Leaves of Grass:***

> "The old forever new things . . . you foolish child! . . .
> the closest simplest things – this moment with you,
> Your person and every particle that relates to your person. . . [p. 94]

And, like Gilbert and Oliver, both of whom learned from Whitman, Whitman taught (and got in trouble with his era's censors) that humans' most intense

experience of being *present-to-the-present* might be sex, as in (one of the tamer passages):

I Sing the Body Electric

> "I Sing the body electric,
> The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
> They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
> And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul. . .
>
> "The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account, that of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect."
> [pp. 250-251]

A central American trope (to borrow a term from literary theory, a trope being just a fancier word for an image or metaphor that has earned staying-power, i.e., it is used over and over without itself becoming a cliché) is that of the open road, of being on the road in a quest of becoming, of being on the road in search of oneself, of being on the road in search of the real America.

Moving, always moving; motion, always motion is the primal American metaphor; restless, seeking, always seeking. That trope is deep in the American grain, from the apocryphal story of Daniel Boone saying "it's time to move when you can see the smoke from your neighbor's cabin," to Huck and Jim on that raft going down the Mississippi before heading west to "Injun country," to Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty "on the road" in Jack Kerouac's novel ***On the Road***.

But Whitman was there first, as in:

Song of the Open Road

> "Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
> Healthy, free, the world before me,
> The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.
>
> Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
> Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
> Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
> Strong and content I travel the open road.
>
> The earth, that is sufficient,
> I do not want the constellations any nearer,
> I know they are very well where they are,

I know they suffice for those who belong to them. . .

You road I enter upon and look around, I believe you are not all that is here,
I believe that much unseen is also here." [pp. 297-298]

So, why Walt Whitman? Why now?

First, in these fractious times of culture wars and political tribalism, Whitman reminds us we are all in this together. There is no you, there is no me, there is only us. We either go down together squabbling about superficial differences, or we solve our differences together, first by embracing them and, second, by recommitting to the foundational American values of liberty, equality, and opportunity.

Simple, really.

But Whitman teaches more. At virtually any page in his work he will help you be *present-to-the-present*, he will help you be present-to-yourself, as in:

A Noiseless Patient Spider

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you, O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul."
[pp. 564-565]

These notes are the merest of glimpses into Whitman's offerings. We've not looked into his great Civil War poems "Drum Taps," his profound elegy on the death of Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," or his meditations on America in "On Blue Ontario's Shores."

But, for now, like the spider fulfilling its nature, Whitman will take you on the road to personal and national self-discovery helping you write the poem that is your life and helping us write the poem that is America, for after all, ". . . America is the greatest poem."

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Intro End Notes

1. Folsom, Lowell Edwin, *"America's 'Hurrah Game': Baseball and Walt Whitman"* in **The Iowa Review** (Summer, 1980) V.11, No. 2, p. 69.
2. Folsom, pp. 70 & 75.
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5. Cronin, Brian. *"Did 'Bull Durham' misquote Walt Whitman on baseball?"* in **Los Angeles Times** (March 28, 2012) available at Did 'Bull Durham' misquote Walt Whitman on baseball? - Los Angeles Times (latimes.com) accessed February 24, 2023.
6. Ibid.
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Cent Stamp-Walt Whitman from Here

Wikicommons Walt Whitman (1819-1892), age 37, frontispiece to *Leaves of grass*, Fulton St., Brooklyn, N.Y., 1855, steel engraving by Samuel Hollyer from a lost daguerreotype by Gabriel Harrison Here

Classic Book Notes End Notes

Nb. To avoid littering these End Notes with Ibids., all quotations from Whitman are from:

Whitman, Walt. Complete Poetry and Selected Prose. Ed. Justin Kaplan. (New York: The Library of America, 1982). The page number is at the end of each quote.

1. Porter, Lavelle, "Should Walt Whitman Be #Cancelled?" available Here accessed 22 April 2020.
2. Townsend, Kathleen Kennedy, *"Walt Whitman and the Soul of Democracy"* (July 8, 2011) ***The Atlantic*** Here accessed April 17, 2020.
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4. Prior, Karen Swallow. “Why Walt Whitman Called America the ‘Greatest Poem’” (December 25, 2016), ***The Atlantic*** Here accessed April 14, 2020.
5. Simon, Ed. *”Why We Will Need Walt Whitman in 2020”, **New York Times*** (December 30, 2019) available Here accessed April 17, 2020.

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