What you hold in your hands (or perhaps in the palm of one hand) as you read this introduction is not so much a book in the usual sense of the word as a moment in a long and intimate conversation. Walt Whitman devoted three decades in this work to unbinding the poet, the poem, the book, and the reader so we could leap into one another’s arms. What makes *Leaves of Grass* revolutionary – and timely – is the poet’s reinvention of the poem and the world of the poem and his open-ended invitation to everyone to join him. More than 150 years after its initial publication, that reinvention is still a work in progress.

*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.*

It is common – and partly correct – to refer to *Leaves of Grass* as “a collection of poems.” But to leave it at that is to obscure the passion and single-mindedness with which Whitman nurtured the work as a living being growing into a living world. To encounter *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman insisted, is to encounter a person in the world – a person who encompasses multitudes; and we do ourselves a disservice as readers if we approach it as anything less. The work speaks for itself, and I encourage you to leap into it the way you might leap into a conversation that piques your interest. Do it now if you wish, and return to this introduction later, with Whitman and his multitudes singing in your ears.

*...draw nigh and commence,
It is no lesson....it lets down the bars to a good lesson,
And that to another....and every one to another still.*

Walt Whitman was born in 1819 in Huntington, Long Island, and spent the first four years of his life there before his family moved to Brooklyn in 1823. He attended public school in Brooklyn from 1825-1830 but ended his formal schooling at the age of eleven. He worked for a short time as an errand boy in a lawyer’s office and a doctor’s office before becoming an apprentice for the *Long Island Patriot*, where he began to learn the craft of printing from the master printer William Hartshorne (1775-1859). He worked in printing in Brooklyn and New York from 1832-1836 but lost his job after an August 1836 fire that decimated the printing district. He returned to Long Island and taught school for a short time but went back to New York in 1841 and worked as a compositor, printer, editor, and writer there and in Brooklyn (with a brief stint in New Orleans, where he edited the *Daily Crescent*) until 1855, when the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared. Whitman continued to work in Brooklyn until after the Civil War broke out. He
traveled to Virginia when he learned that his brother George had been wounded at Fredericksburg and moved to Washington in 1863, where he remained until he suffered a stroke in 1873 and moved to Camden, New Jersey, to live with George. He remained in Camden until his death in 1892.

Whitman’s formal schooling ended when he was eleven, but his education did not. As Ezra Greenspan noted (and Ed Folsom reiterated), “the printing office replaced the schoolroom as the site’ of Whitman’s education.” In addition to his apprenticeship with Hartshorne, he worked with Brooklyn printers Erastus Worthington and Alden Spooner before he became a journeyman printer in Manhattan in the mid-1830s; and he maintained to the end of his life that this was worth more than the education any college could have provided. Had he not learned to make books before he began to write the one most responsible for making him, he certainly would have been a different person and written a different book (and he likely would not have said that the making of books more consistently interested him than the writing of them).

When Whitman looked back on his apprenticeship, he spoke of “anticipatory vision,” how he could not compose a line without seeing how it would look in print. Much has been made of Whitman’s attention to the sound and music of America in his composition, and rightly so. The line from Whitman to the spoken word artists of performance poetry is clear – and is often explicitly acknowledged. But Whitman is equally attentive to the shape and visual impact of poetry as a work of the hands. The poem is a material object, and he expects his readers to lay not only our eyes and ears but also our hands on it. In books, leaves are meant to be touched and turned, and the leaves of this work are an important piece of the whole composition. Some critics, emphasizing Whitman’s attention to sound and his desire to make his poetry as much like the spoken word as possible, have seen the page as a film or barrier between Whitman and his readers. This may be true, but only in the way skin is a film or barrier between lovers. Whitman celebrates the body in the body of his poems and, with it, the possibilities skin and the page afford for making love. Poetry is to be spoken and heard, but it is also to be seen and touched as it speaks, sees, and touches.

_Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches this touches a man,
(Is it night? Are we here together alone?)
It is I you hold and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms...

Since the moment you hold in your hand is a version of the work Whitman settled on as the final edition not long before his death, a brief biography of the poem is in order to supplement the brief biography of the poet. Particularly if you accepted my earlier invitation and have returned to this introduction after diving into the work itself, you have no doubt noticed that much of it is autobiographical. We meet Whitman in his work, but the work itself is also a person in the world – and both grow and change in the three decades between the edition printed here and the first edition printed in 1855.

That first edition is the most explicitly autobiographical, and it most clearly invites us into the making of the book as an intimate conversation. It is often described as containing twelve poems, all of which were incorporated into later editions, eleven of which are included in this edition. But it is somewhat misleading to speak of *Leaves of Grass* in its original form as a “collection” of poems and even more misleading to speak of poems as being “contained” in a book. It is a thin volume, fewer than 100 pages, in a simple binding. Because the first few pages are set in two columns and numbered in roman numerals, they have been read as a prose introduction (though they were not labeled as such). The remaining pages, numbered 14-95, are broken into lines that mark them as poetry; and there are breaks that indicate twelve sections. But there is no table of contents, and the twelve sections are not titled. Neither the author’s name nor the name of the publisher appear on the title page. There is, as Malcolm Cowley says in his introduction to the version of the original edition that Viking published in 1959, a “portrait of a devil-may-care American workingman, one who might be taken as a somewhat idealized figure in almost any crowd.”

“Walter Whitman” is listed as the copyright holder, but it is not until the middle of the first section that we are introduced to “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.” Whitman designed the book, set at least some of the type, and helped with the printing, so it is reasonable to assume that the effect is carefully orchestrated. In this edition, we walk into a crowd, into the middle of a conversation, where we meet not only Whitman but also America. That conversation is a poem, new as “America” is new, and, in the middle of it, we are engaged in its making. In the three decades of editions that follow, the poem breaks into poems (just as a crowd breaks into persons as we come to know one another in the crowds of which we are a part), and it grows (just as a crowd grows as persons continue to gather). There are 383 poems in the “deathbed” edition. Applying Whitman’s “anticipatory vision” to this work, coming to know it is a matter of seeing the whole body of those poems in the poem with which it all began: this, Walt might say of each edition, is what the poem looks like when we make a book of it. And this, he almost certainly would say, is the way we make ourselves and the way we make America.

Whitman’s life spans the period in which he locates the real birth of America – more real, he says, than what happened in the revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. And the making of *Leaves of Grass* begins before the Civil War (probably around 1850) and ends after (with the edition “finalized” just before Whitman’s death in 1892). The finality of the final edition is dictated by Whitman’s impending death, not by any sense that the work is done; and that sense that there is still work to be done is critical to Whitman’s poetry, as is the historical location of the particular work that takes place in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman sought not simply to say what the poetry (and particularly the epic poetry) of “the West” said but to do what it did. Like Homer, he saw the making of a nation as being entangled with war and its aftermath. As we encounter the work now, this raises the question of whether the struggle is over or if it is, as Che Guevara suggested, ongoing. It also expands the observation about Whitman’s education made by Ezra Greenspan and reiterated by Ed Folsom. The print shop, we might say, was the site of his secondary education, where he studied after grammar school; but the war was the site of his...
higher education. And that is critical to the growth of the 1855 poem into the crowd of poems that gathered around Whitman in 1892, and to the work – the poem – that is still in progress.

Whitman experienced the war not as a soldier but as a nurse, and that is central to his understanding of the institution of the dear love of comrades that is, in turn, central to his vision of democracy and of America in particular. From the first edition to the last, Whitman embraced the epic tradition by creatively subverting it. That is evident in his design of the first edition in which he set out to replace the “hero” with what he referred to as “the democratic average.” But it becomes even clearer as his experience of the war leads him to revise and add leaves. His experience of the war, like his earlier education in the print shop, led to an anticipatory vision which he referred to as symphonic. He used that term to explain why he resisted repeated suggestions to cut pieces (often those related to sex and sexuality) out of *Leaves of Grass*. To remove any piece, he insisted, would be to destroy the whole in the same way that taking a movement out of a symphony would destroy it. He expressed irritation with critics who looked for “gems” (what we likely would call “sound bites”) to extract from *Leaves of Grass* and insisted that the work must be experienced as a whole. This is anticipated in the introduction of Walt Whitman in the first edition as a “kosmos,” and that also points to an important variation. Not only must the work be experienced as a whole but also every poem that becomes part of the whole. As he thought of *Leaves of Grass*, it seems that it could not be divided into fragments: every person, every part is the whole. And that, I think, grows out of the way he encountered every wounded soldier, North and South, during the war. Every one was – and is – a kosmos, a world, and if America is not embodied in each and every one, then there is no America. And that is a reminder that America (as Langston Hughes noted eighty years after the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published) is still being born.

The last sentence of what is usually read as a prose introduction before the poetry of the first edition begins is often quoted as a standard by which to judge Whitman’s impact: “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” By that standard, Whitman, though absorbed, remains (as he would, I suspect, wish) unproven. *Leaves of Grass* was not well received by critics, many of whom were put off by Whitman’s celebration of sexuality and the body – and most of whom were puzzled by his free verse, which they found difficult to distinguish from prose. Whitman implied that he couldn’t sell any of the almost 800 copies in the first edition and that he even had trouble giving them away. He lost his job at the Department of the Interior in 1865 when his supervisor came across an annotated copy. Libraries refused to buy the book. Booksellers refused to recommend or publicize it. It was legally banned in Boston, resulting in the withdrawal of a planned edition from publication.

One exception was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who praised the first edition enthusiastically in a letter to Whitman. Emerson’s praise grew a bit more muted after Whitman excerpted his letter without permission on the cover of the second (1856). But it seems clear that Emerson saw Whitman as a step in the right direction toward the American poetry and the American poet he had called for in one of his best known essays, where he wrote that “it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, – a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing... The poet
has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.” Whitman seems to have taken Emerson’s advice in that essay to heart: “Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say ‘It is in me, and shall out.’ Stand there, baulked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage draw out of thee that dream-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity.” To the end of his life, Whitman resolutely resisted pressure – including pressure from Emerson – to remove “offending” sections. And, at the end of his life, he took pleasure in recounting how, when his Boston publisher James R. Osgood withdrew a new edition of Leaves of Grass in 1882 under pressure from the Boston District Attorney, another publisher reprinted it in Philadelphia, where the publicity resulting from the Boston ban caused sales to boom.

Confronted with the epic proportions of the massive work that *Leaves of Grass* became, it may be difficult to see through it to the ecstatic mystical burst of the first edition with which it began; but the reader Whitman needs really must have it both ways. Malcolm Cowley was right to locate Whitman in the tradition of mysticism (which puts him, appropriately, in the company of William Blake) and to recognize in that edition the unitive experience that enables the visionary to speak with the authority afforded by a God’s eye glimpse. Everything in that volume was written in a five year period of political turmoil when Whitman had good reason to fear that the democratic experiment he took America to be would be stillborn. He could hear the boundless open welcoming inclusion that he believed intrinsic to democracy. But he could also hear and see (in New York as well as in New Orleans) the ugly brutal exclusion inherent in the peculiar institution of chattel slavery and – even then – the drumbeats of an approaching war that threatened to tear America apart before it was born. He sang the body whole, but he could see it broken, and his anticipatory vision meant that he could see the dream irrevocably shattered. The edition he settled on includes the whole vision, but it is scattered through the breaking and tearing of the body he witnessed as a nurse in a war that appears brutal even through eyes dimmed by the violence of the century that followed Whitman’s. To see the vision broken across the narrative of a war stitched in among the leaves that announced it puts it in a place that Whitman, at the end of his life, would have thought right – between Che’s long struggle that will not end easily and Frederick Douglass’ struggle that will not end as long as there is life.

The poet dies. The poem continues.

*Remember my words, I may again return,*
*I love you, I depart from materials,*
*I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead.*