

FineBooks & COLLECTIONS

ISSUE 17.3 // SUMMER 2019

A detailed photograph of an astronaut in a white space suit, floating in space. The astronaut's helmet is prominent, reflecting the bright light of the sun, which creates a strong lens flare effect. The background is a deep blue and black space with some distant stars. The astronaut's hands are visible, and they appear to be holding onto something, though it's not clearly defined.

GONZO
In Hot Pursuit
of Hunter S.
Thompson

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Singing the
Praises of
Walt Whitman

/ PAGE 22

**LUNAR
LANDING
AT 50**

OVER THE MOON
AT HARVARD

/ PAGE 19

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CELEBRATING WHITMAN

The bicentennial of the birth of Walt Whitman is being sung the whole year through. There'll be lots of poetry, obviously, and also performances, walking tours, cakes, symposia, lectures, and, of course, exhibitions. A new USPS stamp was issued for his actual two-hundredth birthday, May 31.

Many of the Whitman bicentennial events are found under the aegis of the Whitman 2019 Consortium, an "international collective bringing together all people interested in his life and work." More than eighty organizations, venues, and individuals have signed on, including the Academy of American Poets, Center for Book Arts, Folger Shakespeare Library, Grolier Club, Long Island Museum, Louisiana Landmarks Society, Morgan Library & Museum, New York Public Library, and Providence Athenaeum. The consortium also includes the Walt Whitman Birthplace in

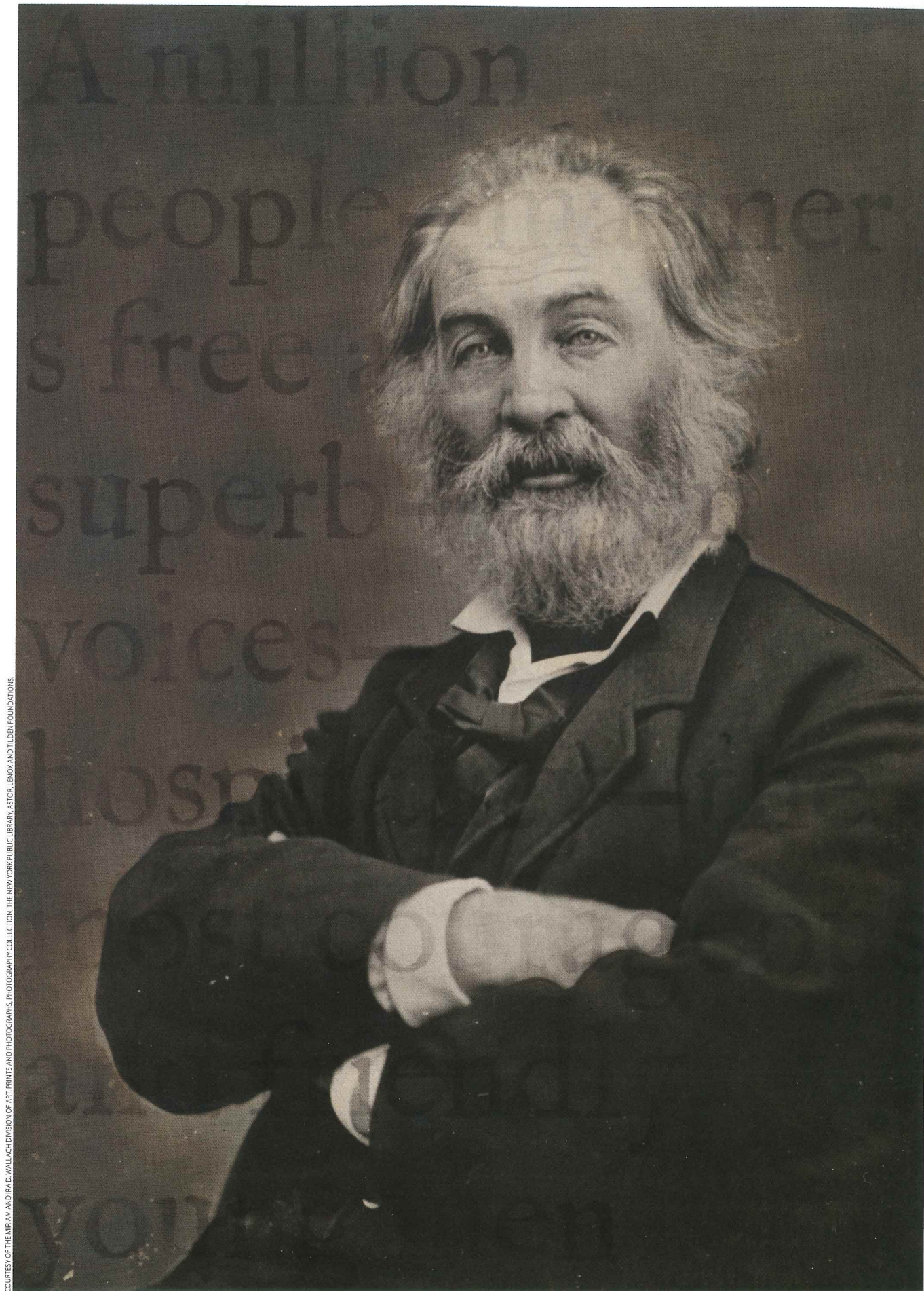
Huntington Station, New York, and the Walt Whitman House in Camden, New Jersey, where he died in 1892.

As one of America's greatest poets, Whitman probably needs little introduction. There are, however, and perhaps surprisingly, still many questions about his early years and his transformation from newspaperman and house builder into free-verse pioneer. Of farming stock and English and Dutch ancestry, Whitman called his natal Long Island "fish-shape Paumanok," using an indigenous name for the region. His reminiscences of youth as a "Paumanacker," in *Specimen Days & Collect* (1882), make for fascinating reading today.

The Good Gray Poet Turns 200

BY MATTHEW WILLS

RIGHT:
Walt Whitman,
c. 1865,
by Mathew Brady

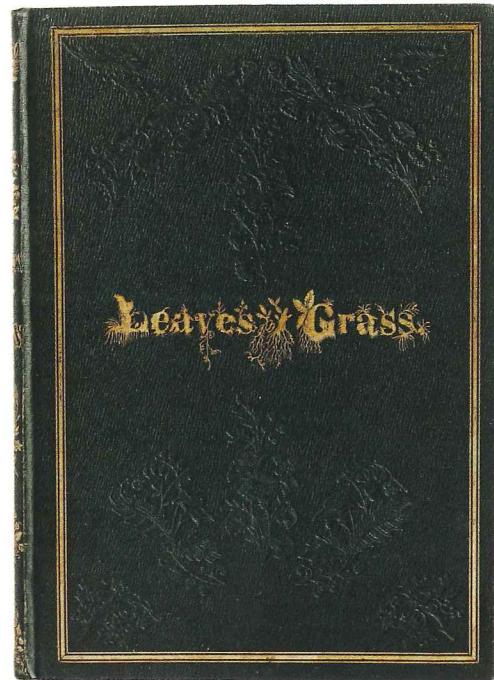


COURTESY OF THE MIRIAM AND IRA D. WALLACH DIVISION OF ART, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS, PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, ASTOR, LENOX AND TILDEN FOUNDATIONS



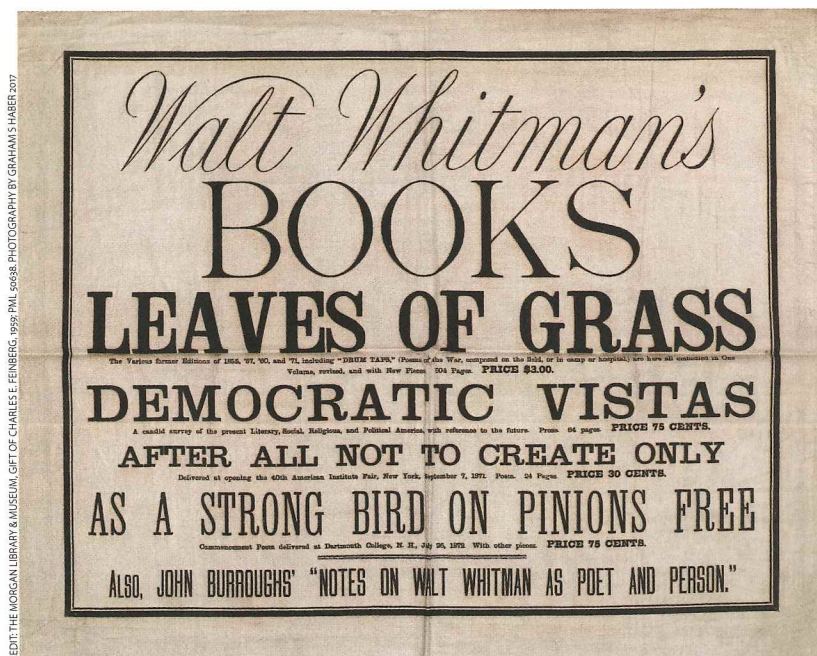
This albumen print on card mount onto which someone scrawled in ink, "Walt Whitman and his rebel soldier friend Pete Doyle," is on display at the Morgan Library & Museum beginning June 7. The photograph was taken, possibly by Moses P. Rice and Sons, in 1865.

CREDIT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION



The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) owned by collector Susan Jaffe Tane and currently on exhibit at the Grolier Club in *Poet of the Body: New York's Walt Whitman* through July 27.

COURTESY OF THE GROLIER CLUB



Also on exhibit at the Morgan: a broadside advertisement for "Walt Whitman's Books," dramatically printed in various types on linen, circa 1871. There is also a mention along the bottom border of John Burroughs' biography, *Notes on Walt Whitman*.

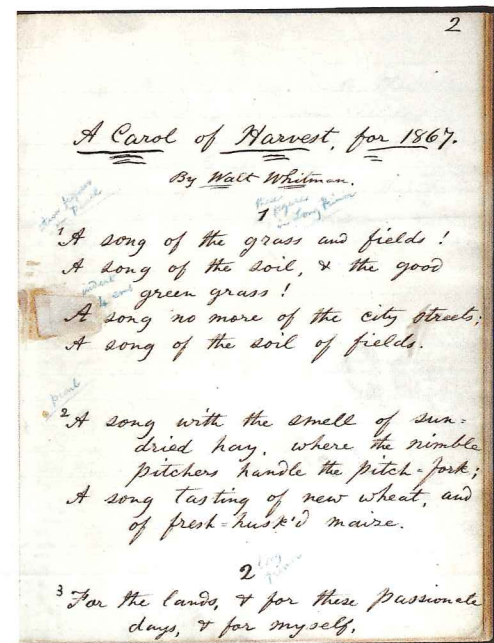
During his childhood, the family moved an average of once a year. Young Whitman was working before he was a teenager. His resume reads as the apotheosis of the jack-of-all-trades: office boy, printer, compositor, school teacher, electioneer for Martin Van Buren, editor, publisher, carpenter, wound-dresser, volunteer nurse, and government clerk. In 1842, he published a temperance novel called *Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate*. He was still building houses for a living in Brooklyn when he first published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, and he was fired from his Department of the Interior job in Washington, D.C., ten years later, supposedly because of the scandalous content in the now-classic poetry collection.

Unusually open about sexuality—both heterosexual and homosexual, though these terms were not yet in use—Whitman had the honor of being banned in Boston as obscene in 1882, but neither that nor a paralytic stroke slowed him down. A man very conscious of his celebrity (he admired P. T. Barnum immensely) and new media (more than a hundred photographs of him are known), he charged into a legacy that still reverberates—this year especially.

"He's really our national poet, even our universal poet, writing about democracy, nature, death, sexuality, and inclusiveness. In broadly cataloging human experience, he's remarkably elastic, with timeless messages in which you can find what you need. In this time of cultural and political divides, his is a voice that expresses things that bind us together as well as celebrating our individuality," said Michael Inman, curator of rare books at the New York Public Library.

Walt Whitman: America's Poet, on view at the NYPL through July 27, draws on material from across the library's special collections divisions. More than seventy-five items are on display. There's a copy of the 1855 edition of *Leaves* with Whitman's own notes sewn and pinned onto the unbound pages. Whitman copyrighted this first edition on May 15, 1855, and published 795 copies during the first week of that July. Less than two hundred copies of this self-published work exist today, all of them slightly different. The original *L. of G.*, as Whitman would himself abbreviate the title, encompassed twelve poems. It was a meadow compared to the prairies of poetry to come. The next year, 1856, he published a thirty-poem edition along with a letter of encouragement from Ralph Waldo Emerson that began: "Dear Sir—I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of 'LEAVES OF GRASS.' I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed."

Emerson's letter was printed by Whitman without Emerson's permission, creating what may or may not be the first author's blurb, but it certainly is one of the punchiest:



The eighteen-page fair copy of the poem, "A Carol of Harvest," the longest Whitman manuscript remaining in private hands. From the collection of Susan Jaffe Tane.

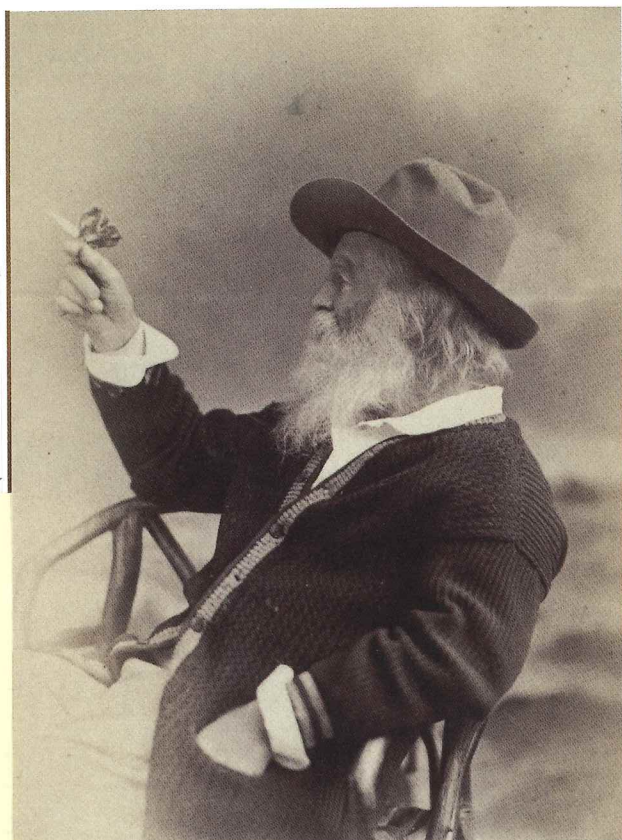
COURTESY OF THE GROLIER CLUB

"I greet you at the beginning of a great career." Whitman was no slouch when it came to self-promotion; he even wrote anonymous reviews of his own work to get his name out there. He didn't stop at two editions, either; he revised existing poems and added new poems, publishing new editions throughout his life. Many scholars consider the 1860 edition the finest. While preparing what would be called the "deathbed" edition of 1891–1892, Whitman said it should "absolutely supersede all previous ones." This final lifetime edition contains over four hundred poems.

The "Blue Book" is also a highlight of the NYPL exhibit. This was the author's own copy of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, so named because of its blue paper wrapper. This is the copy he carried during the Civil War, while he volunteered amidst the horror of military hospitals around Washington, D.C. Heavily annotated with revisions, notes, and cut-and-paste rearrangements, the book is hugely significant in tracing Whitman's poetic evolution. It's also the very book found on Whitman's desk at the Department of the Interior by Secretary James Harlan in June of 1865. Whitman was fired the next day; Harlan's letter of termination is here, too. (Friends in high places got him a new clerkship in the Attorney General's office.)

Fittingly, Manhattan is a hub for Whitman celebrations this bicentennial year—after all, Whitman did write an ode to "Manhatta" which ends: "A million people—manners free and superb—open voices—hospitality—the most courageous and friendly young men, / City of hurried and sparkling waters! city of spires and masts! / City nested in bays! my city!" In addition to the NYPL show, two more major exhibitions are being held this summer, all overlapping in the middle of July for those "Whitmaniacs" making travel plans. "Specimen," or exemplary, days could be made of it by visiting the NYPL, the Grolier Club, and the Morgan Library, one after the other, and reveling in the treasures on display.

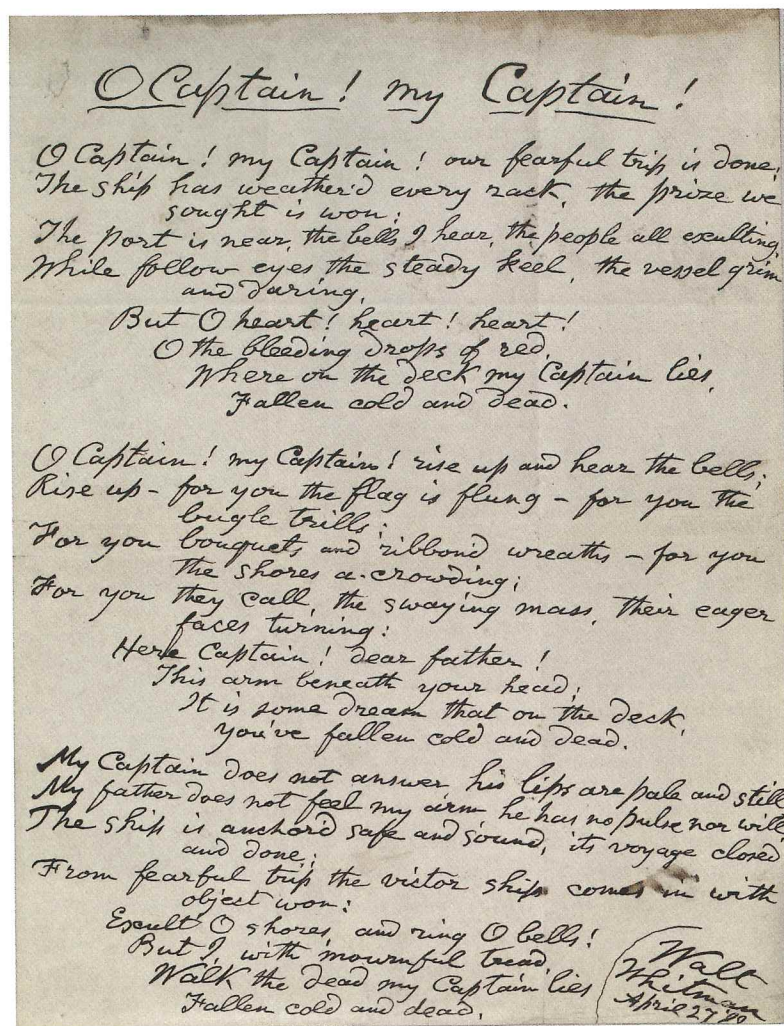
At the Grolier Club, the presiding genii of the Walt Whitman Consortium, New York University professor Karen Karbiener and collector Susan Jaffe Tane have teamed up to curate *Poet of the Body: New York's Walt Whitman*, on view through July 27. The highlight of this show may well be the display of every single edition of *Leaves of Grass* published in Whitman's lifetime. Whitman's publishing history is complicated, to say the least. It's a source of much "speculation and irritation," said Karbiener in a recent interview. The Grolier show will display nine editions—nine being Whitman's own count of his editions. For some of these, multiple copies will be shown for comparison. Inscriptions and signatures, annotations, additions, different bindings and typography; each individual volume has a story to tell. Tane's three personal copies of the 1855 edition, which was printed with help from Whitman himself, should grab viewers' attention as well. Each is a unique object. Tane, who has also supported the



CREDIT: PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

ABOVE: This 1873 photograph of the Good Gray Poet is on display at the Morgan Library.

RIGHT: The Morgan's Bard of Democracy exhibition also showcases an autograph manuscript of Whitman's poem, "O Captain! My Captain!" signed by Whitman on April 27, 1890.



CREDIT: THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM, NY 10028. PHOTOGRAPH BY GRAHAM S. HABEEB, 2012

NYPL and Morgan exhibits, said that her initial acquisition of a copy of the 1855 *L. of G.* set her on a course of collecting Whitman.

As a consequence, much of the Grolier show is from Tane's deep collection. There are letters and photographs, including portraits by famed photographer Mathew Brady and the painter Thomas Eakins. The "Poet of the Body" will be physically represented by samples of Whitman's hair, including two hair rings made by the jeweler John Johnston, Whitman's friend and benefactor. For people unable to attend in person, the digital component of the exhibit, put together by Bard College design students, promises some amazing perspectives.

"There's never been such a comprehensive display of Whitman editions before," said Karbiener. "Whitmaniacs will be able to see material that's never been shown publicly before."

The final point of the Manhattan Whitman bicentennial triangle is the Morgan Library, which is hosting *Walt*

Whitman: Bard of Democracy from June 7 through September 15. Guest curator Ted Widmer described the exhibition as a celebration of "Whitman's big, inclusive voice, as writer, patriot, gay icon, and cultural omnivore." Noting that Whitman is "someone whose reputation is still evolving," Widmer pointed to the synergy of Whitman's two-hundredth birthday falling during the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, considered the birth of the modern gay rights movement. As a pathbreaking figure in the literature of same-sex attraction, Whitman's influence is documented in this exhibit through material from Oscar Wilde (who met the elderly Whitman), as well as from Hart Crane, Federico García Lorca, and Allen Ginsberg, twentieth-century poets deeply affected by Whitman.

The Morgan exhibit includes another trove of books, manuscripts, and photographs. Highlights here include an early 1850s notebook where the germ of *Leaves of Grass* can be found, and that famous congratulatory letter from Ralph Waldo Emerson praising the first edition. There's

the manuscript of an essay called the "The Eighteenth Presidency!" which wasn't published in Whitman's lifetime. It reveals what Widmer describes as a "surprisingly angry and very political Whitman" critiquing the political culture of the fraught 1856 election—a very different picture from the young, nature-loving, sensual poet or the "Good Gray Poet" of Whitman's old age.

Another of Widmer's don't-miss items is the page of notes Whitman distilled from conversations with his friend John Burroughs about the birds one can hear in Washington, D.C. in April. Burroughs, who wrote the first biography of Whitman, titled *Notes on Walt Whitman, as Poet and Person* (1867), gained later renown as a naturalist. The notes are background material for Whitman's famed elegy, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865), written upon Abraham Lincoln's assassination on April 14, 1865. The haunting poem has a virtual soundtrack: the

beautiful birdsong of the hermit thrush, "Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird,/ Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes,/ Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and the pines."

More than once in his writings, Whitman wished his disembodied spirit or voice or atomic being would return in the future. Two hundred years after his birth, 127 years after his death, America's bard is still very much in the air, under our feet, in our ears, and before our eyes. In the epigraph to the so-called deathbed edition, he began, "Come, said my Soul/Such verses for my Body let us write, (for we are one,)/That should I after death invisibly return,/Or, long, long hence, in other spheres,/There to some group of mates the chants resuming..."

The chanting will surely be loud this anniversary year.

Matthew Wills writes regularly for *JSTOR Daily* and his natural history blog (matthewwills.com).



CREDIT: JONATHAN BLANC

The New York Public Library's installation of *Walt Whitman: America's Poet*.