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THE NEW YORK CENTER FOR VISUAL HISTORY

presents

A VOICES AND VISIONS FILM

WALT WHITMAN

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Song of Myself"):

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as
good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease...
observing a spear of summer grass.

NARRATOR: In 1855, a book appeared which changed the course of world literature. It was unlike any book that had ever been published, a new species, organic like its title: LEAVES OF GRASS.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Song of Myself"):

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?
Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

ALLEN GINSBERG: My father was a high school teacher across the river in Paterson, New Jersey, and he taught Whitman. So I got Whitman very early, as a kind of patriotic poet and American poet, the high school hero poet. Then I had a really interesting high school teacher in East Side High School, Mrs. Frances Durbans, 300 pounds, who read the line, "I find no fat sweeter than that which sticks to my own bones," and I realized the enormous humanity and charm of Whitman, his complete appeal.

WHITMAN (Actor): I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love.

GALWAY KINNELL: I really came to love Whitman when I was in France, teaching at the University of Grenoble, in 1956, when I was 29 years old. I taught a course on Whitman, and I can't imagine in any other country a young poet having to discover the great national poet on his own, a hundred years after the great work had been written, but that's the way it was.

WHITMAN (Actor): I bequeath myself to the grass...

DONALD HALL: When I was growing up as a poet, from say 17, for ten years, I was growing up under the new criticisms, which couldn't find room for him. When I did read him I didn't know how to take it. The result was that I saved him for my middle age,which was very fortunate. Suddenly when I was in my thirties, I started reading Whitman and I was ready for him, and here was this immense poet, this enormously great poet of my own country...

WHITMAN (Actor): I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love. If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles."

NARRATOR: From his earliest days on Long Island, much that Whitman saw on his trips and excursions found its way into his poetry, the world viewed on a jaunt, or a newspaper round from Brooklyn to New York. When he was old, he settled in Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey, visited regularly by friends, admirers, and disciples. He spoke of many revisions and editions of LEAVES OF GRASS, and busied himself with the definitive version of the book that had occupied his whole life.

WHITMAN (Actor): It is tragic, the fate of the first

LEAVES. None of them were sold, practically none. Well, I did get rid of all of the books. I sent a few copies around.

DONALD HALL: Here it is, here's a copy of it: 1855. It didn't have his name on it as author, copyrighted by Walter Whitman. You could more or less guess that Whitman wrote it. It's comparatively brief, short -- the first version of LEAVES OF GRASS, ninety-five pages, but they're just amazing.

NARRATOR: Whitman sent one of these 795 copies of LEAVES OF GRASS to an American literary giant, who had been calling for a new American poetry.

WHITMAN (Actor): "I find LEAVES OF GRASS the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom America has yet contributed. I greet you at the beginning of a great career which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start. Signed Ralph Waldo Emerson." (reading from Emerson's letter)

NARRATOR: Hundreds of pictures were taken of Whitman, but only a few survive of the emerging poet who burst upon the literary scene in the 1850's. The writer who started as a printer and journalist. Whitman's first job was as an apprentice printer in 1831, when he was 12 years old. Between 1830 and 1850, the number of daily newspapers in the U.S. grew from 36 to 254. It was popular journalism, aimed at the working man, with feature stories about urban life and accounts of crime and violence. Whitman worked as contributor, reviewer, or editor on a number of petty papers. The new medium fostered a new profession with its own personality. The reporter, a Bohemian observer with his fingers on the city's pulse.

JUSTIN KAPLAN: What's important about Whitman's journalist background, I think, is that this in a sense is his bank account of experience, this is the way he learns the city, this is the way learns what he calls "million-footed Manhattan," this is the way he learns about violence and conflict. This is the way he learns

about American society. It's very direct exposure to experience: there's nothing bookish about Whitman's education.

WHITMAN (Actor): I abandoned the conventional themes: None of the stock orientation or the choice plots of love and war and exceptional high personages of old world song. Take a few lines of that.

HORACE TRAUBEL, Whitman's first biographer (Actor, reading from Tennyson):

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
Or long-hair'd page in crimson clad,
Goes by to tower'd Camelot.

WHITMAN (Actor): "Goes by to tower'd Camelot."

ALLEN GINSBERG: He set out to write a poetry which appeared to have no literary antecedents, which had cut itself loose from conventional references and conventional subject matter. Conventional poetry tended to deal with completely irrelevant, futile experience, with the world of Sir Walter Scott or the world of William Shakespeare. Whitman wanted very much a poetry that would deal with the world that he knew, with stevedores, with steam engines.

GALWAY KINNELL: As far as actually observing, seeing, experiencing, tasting, feeling the things around one, Whitman was rather unusual. Most of the other 19th century poets, Emily Dickinson apart, were blind. Poe you could say was absolutely blind. You would not know that Poe lived in New York, walked down the same streets among the same sites that Whitman did: Poe's poetry was the poetry of a blind man, a man who was imagining somewhere else.

ALLEN GINSBERG: Poe was a dream generalist, that is, a philosophical dreamer who had phantoms that he described in detail. Melville, the other great poet of the 19th century, in his prose had infinite command of minute particulars. In his poetry, quite a good command, but still was writing in a limited closed form, but he was getting close. Emily Dickinson had intelligent metaphysical details, and garden detail, but it was a smaller form. Now Whitman opened up space completely, opened up the space of the line, broke open the line so he could say anything he wanted, could notice anything he wanted, and could bring in all the everyday particulars of kitchenware life, dock life, skyscraper life...

JUSTIN KAPLAN: And it's out of his experience of Manhattan and Brooklyn, as Whitman claimed, that LEAVES OF GRASS arose. He is very much a city poet; he is in many ways our first urban poet.

GALWAY KINNELL: They were looking for an American bard, but they didn't realize that to have one, that bard had to embrace what was American, what was around one, the actual new things of the world. He was immersed in that world, and he loved it.

WHITMAN (Actor): I often wander all day on Manhattan island, through streets, toward the East River, on purpose to have the pleasure of hearing the voices of the native-born and bred workmen and apprentices in the sparyards and on piers. Caulkers on the ship scaffolds, workmen in iron, mechanics to and from their shops, drivers calling to their horses, I like.

DONALD HALL: Well, there's the metaphor of the melting pot. New York full of the boats full of immigrants coming in still; the best descriptions of it are probably still in some of Whitman's poems.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Song of Myself"):

The butcher-boy puts off his killing-clothes, or sharpens
his knife at the stall in the market,
I loiter enjoying his repartee and his shuffle and breakdown.

Blacksmiths with grimed and hairy chests environ the anvil,
Each has his main-sledge . . . . they are all out . . . .
there is a great heat in the fire.

From the cinder-strewed theshold I follow their movements,
The lithe sheer of their waists plays even with their massive arms...

GALWAY KINNELL: Whenever he could he chose the rude word for the elegant one, he chose the Anglo-Saxon word for the latinate word: "Rest the chuff of your hand on my hip," "the blab of the pave," words like that. They simply didn't appear in the poetry of his time.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Song of Myself"):

The blab of the pave . . . . the tires of carts and sluff of bootsoles and talk of the promenaders,
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor,
The carnival of sleighs, the clinking and shouted jokes and pelts of snowballs;

DONALD HALL: You know he thought of making a dictionary of American words. He loved American slang, the phrase "so long" was something he loved.

GALWAY KINNELL: We speak of poets having a good ear, but with Whitman you have to say he had a good mouth. He tasted the words, they have a physical body.

ALLEN GINSBERG: "Seize a bright juice suffuse heaven." As Kerouac would say, "Imagine a line like that, it's like Shakespeare." "Seize a bright juice suffuse heaven."

WHITMAN (Actor): In the latter part of an afternoon, it makes a nice jaunt to go out and see the sunset. A hundred years hence, I often imagine, what an appearance that walk will present a fine summer afternoon. You and I reader, and quite all the people who are now alive won't be much thought of then, but the

world will be just as jolly, and the sun will shine just as bright. And the rivers off there, the Hudson on one side, and the East on the other, will slap along their green waves precisely as now. And other eyes will look upon them about the same as we do.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"):

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore
to shore,
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west,
and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,
Others will see the islands large and small;
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun
half an hour high,
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence,
others will see them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the
falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide.

. . . . . .

I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so
many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the
bright flow, I was refresh'd,

. . . . . .

Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the
swift current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the
thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.

GALWAY KINNELL: Some people were affected by him, Hart Crane in particular, but one really didn't feel that American poetry moved out of Whitman, moved forward from Whitman in the same way that, say, French poetry moved forward from Baudelaire. So it really wasn't until the 1950's that Whitman returned to our poetry. To me the decisive work was Allen Ginsberg's HOWL.

ALLEN GINSBERG (reading from HOWL):

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking
for an angry fix,

ALLEN GINSBERG: After I wrote HOWL, I went back to Whitman because I was interested in how he handled the long line, and I read Whitman from beginning to end in this particular Modern Library edition of LEAVES OF GRASS. He broke open the line so that you could talk with unobstructed breath, you could use the breath for as long as you wanted to explain your idea.

GALWAY KINNELL: The longer the line the more the music can build up.

JUSTIN KAPLAN: He worships the human voice going at full blast sometimes. At one point he said that he could not have written LEAVES OF GRASS if it had not been for Italian opera. He means Bellini and Barzini and Donizetti and others in vogue then. Practically every major city in the country had a resident or travelling opera company, New Orleans, Philadelphia, New York, Boston.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Song of Myself"):

I hear the bravuras of birds . . . . the bustle of growing
wheat . . . . gossip of flames . . . . clack of sticks
cooking my meals.

I hear the sound of the human voice . . . . a sound I love,
I hear all sounds as they are tuned to their uses . . . .

sounds of the city and sounds out of the city . . . .
sounds of the day and night,
I hear the violincello or man's heart's complaint,
And hear the keyed cornet or else the echo of sunset.

I hear the chorus . . . . it is a grand-opera . . . . this
indeed is music!

A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me,
The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full.

I hear the trained soprano . . . . she convulses me like the
climax of my love-grip;
The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
It wrenches unnamable ardors from my breast,
It throbs me to gulps of the farthest down horror,
It sails me . . . . I dab with bare feet . . . . they are licked
by the indolent waves,
I am exposed . . . . cut by bitter and poisoned hail,

GALWAY KINNELL: The King James' Bible was the greatest influence on Whitman's prosody of any poetry he read, of any literature he read, in two ways: one, those long flowing cadences which come through the prose of the Bible, and two, the parallel structure, phrase after phrase would repeat the same syntax, the same words, the same thoughts, and make variations on those.

NARRATOR: Political oratory was another major influence on Whitman's work. As a journalist and partisan, he followed the great political debates of his day. The power of the human voice to reach large audiences and move them inspired Whitman to try and do the same through his poetry.

JUSTIN KAPLAN: What he was looking for was free expressiveness and amplitude and grandeur: all these he believed to be qualities that were appropriate to American democracy, to the expanding American empire even, to the American spirit. Whitman believed that it was the destiny of the United States to democratize and redeem the entire world. He believed in what was then called manifest destiny, that is, the destiny of the United States to fill out the continental limits and even to go way beyond that.

NARRATOR: Manifest destiny was more than idea. It was a political credo, and it meant the annexation of Texas from Mexico, the addition of Arizona, California, and New Mexico to the national domain. For Whitman and Emerson, the expanding territory of Mexico called for a new kind of poet, an explorer to open up new vistas

called for a new kind of poet, an explorer to open up new vistas in verse, just as the pioneers were opening up the continent.

WHITMAN (Actor): Ah, my book and I what a period we presume to span, thirty years, 1850 to 1880, and America in them.... The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. Here is not a nation, but a teeming nation of nations. Here are the roughs, and beards, and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Song of Myself"):

But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,
My left hand hooks you round the waist,
My right hand points to landscapes of continents, and a
plain public road.

Shoulder your duds, and I will mine, and let us hasten forth,
Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go.

If you tire, give me both burdens, and rest the chuff of your
hand on my hip,
And in due time you shall repay the same service to me;
For after we start we never lie by again.

ALLEN GINSBERG: If Whitman tells America I am large, I I contain multitudes, it's that he contains multitudes of thought just like anybody else. I am vast, my mind is as big as the horizon you see about, because when I turn around I can see the horizon. So therefore it enters my mind, so therefore my mind is as big as the horizon.

JUSTIN KAPLAN: Whitman's sense of constant expansion is not simply geographical or political. It goes into an entire notion of a cosmic vision.

GALWAY KINNELL: He wrote in a kind of persona that allowed him to speak for the American human being rather than for Walter

Whitman.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Song of Myself"):
Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,
Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . . eating drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist . . . . no stander above men and women or apart from them . . . . no more modest than immodest.

Unscrew the locks from the doors!
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!

HAROLD BLOOM: Walt Whitman, one of the roughs, an American, eating, drinking, brawling, wenching, embracing, in some sense -- whether sexually or not -- all who come along could not be more at variance with the actual fact.

DONALD HALL: Whitman in his poetry presents himself in his poetry as a kind of brawler and a loud fellow and so on. In real life, in person, I think he was quite quiet for the most part.

HAROLD BLOOM: He was of course very fond of saying, following Emerson, who had said that "consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," so Whitman proclaims very proudly in the very midst of "Song of Myself": Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.

GALWAY KINNELL: He tried to universalize what he lived and make, actually --not only make what he wrote but make himself a kind of type of the American.

WHITMAN (Actor): A pure American breed of reckless health, his body perfect, free from taint, free forever from headache and dyspepsia. Full-blooded, six feet high, a good feeder.

JUSTIN KAPLAN: Whitman in many ways is a poet of liberation. He is trying to liberate poetry from conventional modes, he is also trying to liberate men and women from conventional modes of behavior and sexual conduct. What he wants is the frank recognition of the glory and beauty of nakedness.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "I Sing the Body Electric"):

The expression of a wellmade man appears not only in his face,
It is in his limbs and joints also . . . . it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists,
It is in his walk . . the carriage of his neck . . the flex of his waist and knees . . . . dress does not hide him,
The strong sweet supple quality he has strikes through the cotton and flannel;
To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem . . perhaps more,

. . . . .
I sing the body electric,
. . . . .
Have you ever loved the body of a woman?
Have you ever loved the body of a man?
. . . .
O my body!
. . . .
I believe the likes of you shall stand of fall with my poems, and that they are my poems,
Man's, woman's, child's, youth's, wife's, husband's, mother's, father's, young man's, young woman's poems,

NARRATOR: The poems in LEAVES OF GRASS were constantly changing. Whitman's one great poem was always in the process of being rewritten. There were 95 pages in the first edition of LEAVES OF GRASS, which Whitman printed himself at his own expense. The second edition followed a year later. The third edition, in 1860, was the first to be picked up by a publisher, a thick volume of 456 pages. Many of the early poems were revised, but 124 new poems were added.

DONALD HALL: The version of "Out of the Cradle" that was in 1860 had a different title, "A Word Out of the Sea." He worked over the poem a great deal, cuttings and revisions. I notice that

in the poem as he first published it, it was the line that he cut out, right here on this page: "Out of the boy's mother's womb, from the nipples of her breasts,/ Out of the Ninth Month midnight." It's just listed there casually as a source, but it was too explicit. In a way the whole poem acts out and sings that loss, and it sings it all the more clearly as he revised it, by not stating it.

WHITMAN (Actor): Even as a boy I had the fancy, the wish to write a piece, perhaps a poem, about the seashore, that suggesting dividing line, contact, junction, the solid marrying the liquid. Hours, days, in my Long Island youth and early manhood I haunted the shores. I remember well, I felt that I must one day write a book expressing this liquid, mystic theme.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"):

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
Out of the Ninth-month midnight,
Over the sterile sands and the fields beyond, where the child
leaving his bed wander'd alone, bareheaded, barefoot,
Down from the shower'd halo,
Up from the mystic play of shadows twining and twisting as if
they were alive,
Out from the patches of briers and blackberries,
From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,
From your memories sad brother, from the fitful risings and
fallings I heard,
From under that yellow half-moon late-risen and swollen as if
with tears,
From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the
mist,

DONALD HALL: "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is my favorite single poem of Whitman's, and I think one of the great poems that anyone has written ever. Magnificent poem. He wrote it at the height of his ability, after the first edition, and the

second edition of LEAVES OF GRASS, when he had learned how to write the Walt Whitman poem.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"):

A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,
Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,
I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing.

ALLEN GINSBERG: He was born on Long Island in 1819. There were eight Whitman children who survived infancy. Three or four of them were severly disturbed. And out of the eight, Whitman, who survives and who announces himself as the poet of perfect health, the family is constantly sinking on the social scale, on the economic scale. His father is an unsuccessful farmer, an unsuccessful housebuilder. There's the father's drunkenness, the father's depressions...

HAROLD BLOOM: If you came out of that household, which was a wild and peculiar household, if you evidently could bear even the touch of your own kindred as little as Whitman could bear the touch of his kindred, if you make as the supreme moments of your poetry -- the extraordinary moment in "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life" -- when you throw yourself on the sands and try to embrace the whole of the beach at once, and you say that this is finally your embrace of your own father, and even more crucially in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," when you accept the embrace of the ocean rustling up around your feet, and actually use it to violate the greatest Western taboo, use it as an image of entering the mother sexually, both passages reflect, I think, a Whitman who probably from the time he had the earliest choice about it would not willingly touch

either his mother or his father, let alone anyone after them.

ALLEN GINSBERG: He loved his fellows, he loved his young fellows. And that was universal. Whether it was genital is another matter. Likely it was, as I know I've slept with Neil Cassidy, who slept with Gavin Arthur, who slept with Edward Carpenter, who describes sleeping with Whitman to Gavin Arthur, so there perhaps was some genital directness there.

HAROLD BLOOM: I doubt very much that Whitman had ever allowed himself to have sexual contact with any human being.

GALWAY KINNELL: Probably not until the 1850's did he realize that he was homosexual, and probably not until then did he have some kind of sexual experiences -- which must have been extremely powerful for him, since he was subject to the same inhibitions as the whole period was, and yet I can't imagine that he freely pursued a sexual life. I imagine on the contrary that he lived in a kind of dread of discovery and humiliation, and so suppressed his sexual life to a rather extraordinary degree.

HAROLD BLOOM: There is a crucial line in "Song of Myself," which reads, "To touch my body to someone else's is about as much as I can bear."

ALLEN GINSBERG: "Earth, My Likeness," in which he finally confesses completely to anyone who's reading carefully: "I now suspect there's something fierce in you eligible to burst forth,/ For an athlete is enamour'd of me, and I of him,/ But toward him there is something fierce and terrible in me eligible to burst forth,/ I dare not tell it in words, not even in these songs." So there he's already told you.

JUSTIN KAPLAN: Walt Whitman himself, the poet, is not the sexual swaggerer and the sexual athlete, and blustering athlete of his poems. This is the case of a created dramatic identity. And you can't confuse one with the other. Or you mustn't.

ALLEN GINSBERG: He never was overt in the sense of -- speaking of the love that dare not speak its name. On the other hand his descriptions of his feelings were overt. "A Glimpse":

A glimpse through an interstice caught,
Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room around the stove late of a winter night, and I unremark'd seated in a corner,
Of a youth who loves me and whom I love,

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "A Glimpse"):

Of a youth who loves me and whom I love, silently approaching and seating himself near, that he may hold me by the hand,
A long while amid the noises of coming and going, of drinking and oath and smutty jest,
There we two, content, happy in being together, speaking little, perhaps not a word.

NARRATOR: Whitman was romantically involved in the 1860's with Peter Doyle, a horsecar conductor, twenty eight years his junior.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "When I Heard at the Close of the Day"):

For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,
In the stillness of the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast--and that night I was happy.

GALWAY KINNELL: The fifth section of "Song of Myself" describes a sexual act that is as explicit as you could possibly get, really.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Song of Myself"):

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;
You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my barestript heart,
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet.

DONALD HALL: It was raw stuff for much of the 19th century; he lost a job in Washington on account of his book, because he was the author of these obscene poems, which hardly seem obscene to us. And it was also more or less banned in Boston. Whitman walked on the Boston Common in 1860, with Emerson trying to persuade him to tone down the sexuality, especially the homoerotic images in LEAVES OF GRASS. And Whitman listened, apparently, very politely, and very politely and firmly said, no.

WHITMAN (Actor): If I cut sex out, I might just as well cut everything out. The dirtiest book is an expurgated book. To leave something out is an apology, an admission that something is wrong.

NARRATOR: Whitman's treatment of nakedness was similar to that of his contemporary, the painter Thomas Eakins, who also had little use for the exotic, the picturesque.

WHITMAN (Actor): I never knew but one artist, and that's Tom Eakins, who could resist the temptation to see what ought to be rather than what is. Eakins is not a painter, he is a force. How could they appreciate Eakins, who breaks utterly away from the old, the outworn, the merely traditional, who faces the worst as well as the best.

GALWAY KINNELL: Eakins was a great admirer of Whitman, and painted him. His painting has a lot of the feel of the body that Whitman wanted to achieve.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading "Twenty Eight Young Men"):

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
Twenty-eight young men, and all so friendly,
Twenty-eight years of womanly life, and all so lonesome.

She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window.

Which of the young men does she like the best?
Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.

The beards of the young men glistened with wet, it ran from their long hair,
Little streams passed all over their bodies.

An unseen hand also passed over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies swell to the sun . . . . they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray.

GALWAY KINNELL: If Whitman had one overriding ambition that was it, to get sex and the body into poetry. And he couldn't do it as specifically as I think he would have liked. The amazing thing is that he did it at all.

NARRATOR: The large appreciative audience Whitman expected for LEAVES OF GRASS did not materialize. Even the literary world tended to find the overt sexuality offensive, and the poetry formless.

ALLEN GINSBERG: Whitman fell into what he called his sloth, a period of depression.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "As I Ebb'd With The Ocean of Life"):

O baffled, balk'd, bent to the very earth,
Oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,
Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon
me I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,

NARRATOR: The Civil War pulled Whitman out of himself. The national agony of the war entered his poetry, as did the experiences of ordinary soldiers.

WHITMAN (Actor): In 1862, startled by news that my brother George had been seriously wounded, I hurriedly went down to the field of war in Virginia, and lived thenceforward in camp. Saw great battles and the days and nights afterward, death readily risked. Without those three or four years and the experience they gave, LEAVES OF GRASS would not now be existing.

ALLEN GINSBERG: Whitman's role in the war was not killing but healing. He went to hospitals and took care of young kids who were wounded and sometimes dying, and kissed them on their deathbeds. Probably weeping young boys who had never seen life, and here was this old, bearded Father Time figure totally in love with them, taking care of them.

JUSTIN KAPLAN: When Whitman went down to the warfront looking for his brother, perhaps the first sight that greeted him was the sight of a huge pile of amputated limbs outside of what served as emergency medical headquarters, the field hospital there. The Civil War hospitals were rather brutal places. There was a great deal of suffering, and a great deal of contagion. The surgeons tended to turn to amputation as the first resort.

WHITMAN (Actor): The results of the late battle are exhibited everywhere about here, thousands of cases. The wounded lying on the ground, lucky if their blankets are spread on layers of pine or hemlock twigs or

small leaves. No cots, so little even a mattress. I do not see that I do much good to these wounded and dying.

GALWAY KINNELL: He felt that he had something special to give to the soldiers. So he would take a bath, and buff himself so his cheeks were ruddy, and his white beard was all puffed up, and he put on clean clothes and a great fresh shirt, and so forth, and he'd come into the hospital, the filth and misery of the hospital, like a god. And the soldiers knew him, they would call "Walt, Walt" to him from all directions as he walked out; he would stop to help one write a letter; and a number of them died in his arms. I don't think he ever really recovered emotionally from the effects of the Civil War. I think that though he got something from the experience he gave more than he got.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "The Wound-Dresser"):

some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

DONALD HALL: Whitman is not Homer singing of the valor, or lamenting the death of the hero. He is the intimate poet commemorating the tiny specific sufferings of the dying as he sees them. That's not all he does: he writes also of what the war looks like.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd):

And I saw askant the armies,
I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,
Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles
I saw them,
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody,
And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,)
And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,
But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,
The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

(Reading "Reconciliation"):

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be
utterly lost,
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly
softly wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world;
For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,
I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin--I draw near,
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

NARRATOR: The death of Abraham Lincoln touched Whitman as deeply as any event in his life. Whitman saw Lincoln as a kindred spirit, a president from the heartland of America, who, like Whitman, spoke to the common people.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd):

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.
. . . . .

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd
from the ground, spotting the gray debris,
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the
endless grass,
. . . . .
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

GALWAY KINNELL: "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," full of grief, not only for Lincoln but for everything that had transpired during the war and for the maiming and death of all the soldiers on both sides.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Song of Myself"):

I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there.

NARRATOR: Whitman's Civil War poems completed the great decade of his poetic creativity. He continued to write new poems, but his priority became the revising and polishing of LEAVES OF GRASS. He revised all but 34 of over 400 poems, and published edition after edition. Still considered an outsider by the literary public of his day, he busied himself with shoring up his reputation.

WHITMAN (Actor): Keep it simple. Don't prettify me.

ALLEN GINSBERG: He's old, he doesn't know what's happening to his body, so he says,

As I sit writing here, sick and grown old,
Not my least burden is that dulness of the years, querilities,
Ungracious glooms, aches, lethargy, constipation,
    whimpering ennui,
May filter in my daily songs.

That's a whole little poem. Worried about his constipation getting into his poetry. He never did that before. And he finally realizes a more oriental calm in a poem called "Twilight" in "Sands at Seventy."

The soft voluptuous opiate shades,
The sun just gone, the eager light dispell'd--(I too will soon
    be gone, dispell'd,)
A haze--nirwana--rest and night--oblivion.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"):

Whereto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before
    daybreak,
Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,

ALLEN GINSBERG: All of LEAVES OF GRASS dissolved, all of the earth dissolved, all of the universe dissolved, all the sound of the world dissolved, oblivion.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from 1855 LEAVES OF GRASS):

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? . . . . I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say Whose?
. . . . .
And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

GALWAY KINNELL: For most people death is a defeat, a terrible event. Whitman wanted to belong to life in such a way that the cycle of birth and death would be perfectly acceptable to him at every point. He wanted to be able to die and to feel about death as he might feel about birth.

WHITMAN (Actor): I look upon LEAVES OF GRASS, now finished to the end of its opportunities and powers, as my definitive carte de visite to the coming generations of the new world.

WHITMAN (Poet, reading from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"):

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you--I laid in my stores in advance,
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows but I am enjoying this?

Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?