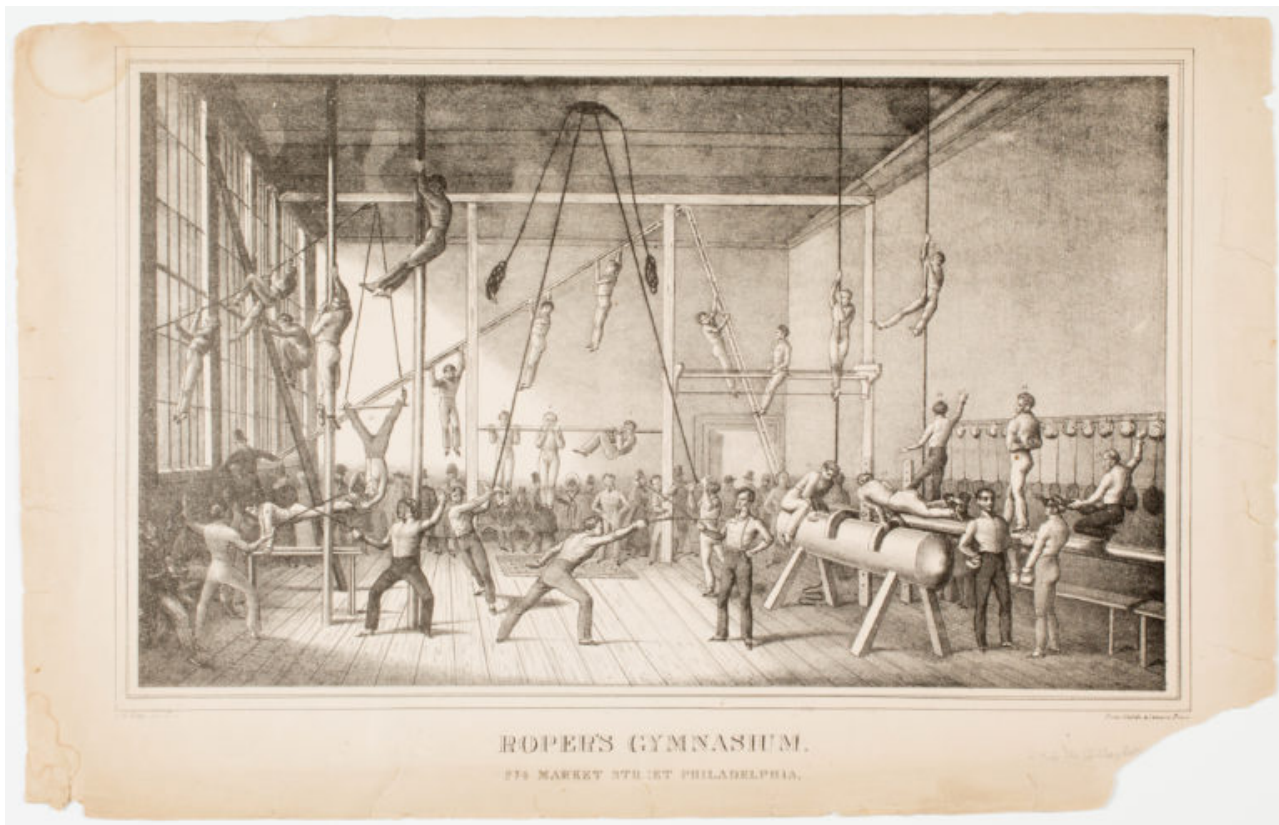


# Song of My Self-Help: Whitman's Rehabilitative Reading



1. A detail of the article from Sunday Morning New York Atlas (September 12, 1858) "Manly Health and Training" – page 1. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. A newspaper page. The masthead reads, "The New York Atlas." A headline beneath that reads in smaller lettering, "Manly Health and Training, With Off-Hand Hints Toward Their

Conditions” by Mose Velsor.

Years before his immersion in the company of injured Union soldiers, Walt Whitman was surrounded by disabled men—or so he claimed. His 1858 column, “Manly Health and Training, with Off-Hand Hints Toward Their Conditions,” republished for the first time in 2015, portrays the mid-nineteenth-century United States as overrun with “feeble” men.<sup>[11]</sup> Throughout the column, Whitman argues that “physical inferiority, in one form or another, is the rule rather than the exception” and offers insight into how readers might remedy this condition. Over the course of thirteen weekly installments, he insists that the American male physique is in desperate need of revitalization, something he proposes literature might supply.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the self-proclaimed “poet of the Body” also authored an instructive physical training text.<sup>[12]</sup> Whitman published the series in *The New York Atlas* under the name Mose Velsor in 1858, between editions of *Leaves of Grass* (fig. 1). While the poet’s prescriptions are fairly representative of nineteenth-century health regimens—strict diet, routine exercise, sexual restraint—Whitman’s essays are remarkably attentive to their own textuality. “Manly Health” not only recommends healthy habits, but also presents text as itself an agent of cure. Henry David Thoreau suggested in *Walden* (1854) that, “to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise... It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object,” and Whitman takes this proposition seriously, providing as methodical instruction in reading as he does in his more conventional health recommendations.<sup>[13]</sup> Attending to such metatextuality in “Manly Health” allows us to reconsider the relationship between text and reader both in and beyond the column, as Whitman draws on the prescriptive project of self-help to articulate a broader theory of literature as a rehabilitative technology. Ultimately, his framing of text probes the parameters of masculine American identity by providing a conduit between “inferior” readers and conceptions of ability.

This approach to literature emerges at a critical point in the poet’s career. Zachary Turpin has noted that when Whitman composed “Manly Health” he was considering abandoning poetry for more instructive genres, possibly in response to the looming threat of war.<sup>[14]</sup> The column’s literary preoccupations, however, situate it not as a departure from *Leaves of Grass*, but as a complement to Whitman’s antebellum poetry. The timing of the publication of “Manly Health” is significant, as its 1858 appearance bridges the second (1856) and third (1860) editions of *Leaves of Grass*. The second edition had been published by Orson Squire Fowler and Samuel Wells, two of the most prominent U.S. phrenologists, and this association may have informed Whitman’s interest in exercise and related health sciences.<sup>[15]</sup>

While the mid-century science of phrenology Whitman encountered during this period is perhaps best remembered for its claims to decipher the contours of human skulls, experts in the field paired this deterministic practice with an

investment in transforming individual character through physical training.<sup>[61]</sup> As Fowler puts it in an 1855 manual, “health of body produces health of mind and purity of feelings... While, therefore, phrenologists should scrutinize the size of organs closely, they should observe the STATE OF HEALTH much more minutely.”<sup>[71]</sup> While phrenologists insisted that the human body was akin to a text that could be both read and revised, Whitman proposes that the act of reading itself could be a catalyst for rebuilding the body. This rehabilitative logic that governs “Manly Health” also extends to the editions of *Leaves of Grass* that bracket it, suggesting Whitman’s investment in rethinking literature’s influence on the body beyond the self-help genre.

Such a porous boundary between body and text has been the subject of much Whitman scholarship.<sup>[81]</sup> In *Disseminating Whitman* (1991), Michael Moon argues that in the ongoing revisionary project of *Leaves of Grass*, “discourses of the body and discourses of the literary interact in ways which extend readers’ conceptions of both realms, and of the range of possible relations between these two realms.”<sup>[91]</sup> “Manly Health” introduces another “possible relation” between the corporeal and the literary. Along with the “affectionate physical presence” that Moon argues Whitman imparts from writer to reader in *Leaves of Grass*, the authorial “We” that offers advice throughout “Manly Health” cultivates an instructive ethos that purports to alter the reader’s physicality by training him.<sup>[101]</sup> Whitman’s column highlights the specifically therapeutic bodily contact imagined by his prescriptive as well as poetic works.



2. Various spines of conduct of life and etiquette books for men from the 1830s-1850s. 1. Timothy Shay Arthur, *Advice to Young Men on Their Duties and Conduct in Life* (Boston, 1848). 2-3. William Alcott. *Young Man’s Guide* (Boston: Lilly, Wait, Colman, & Holden, 1833). 4. *American Gentleman: True Politeness / By an American gentleman.* (New York: Leavitt and Allen, 1848). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Spines of two black

books with worn and elaborately decorated covers. The book on the left is black with gold ornamentation and reads, "Young Man's Guide," while the book to the right is black with raised botanical motifs and reads, "American Gentleman."

Despite this uniquely metatextual approach, Whitman was not alone in his assessment of the nation's health, nor in his desire to intervene. In the wake of increased industrialization, the maintenance of an active, healthy body became a key concern of self-help texts. This literature for middle-class white men and women proliferated in the mid-nineteenth century, and publications ranged from exercise manuals such as Whitman's to comprehensive instruction in cultivating "character," which nearly always recommended physical training.<sup>[111]</sup> These works were as committed to ideas about sex difference as they were to promoting health.<sup>[121]</sup> While Eliza Ware Farrar's *The Young Lady's Friend* (1837) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Means and Ends: Or, Self-training* (1842) offered advice to the authors' "young country-women," the masculinist title of "Manly Health" joins such volumes as William Alcott's *The Young Man's Guide* (1833) and Timothy Shay Arthur's *Advice to Young Men* (1848), which guided men in the development of a moral character and a healthy physique (fig. 2).<sup>[131]</sup> These texts located the body as a site of self-improvement, encouraging corporeal transformation while maintaining strict adherence to a binary understanding of male and female traits.

For the men Whitman addresses, then, self-help was always about pursuing a distinct idea of "manliness" as well as health.<sup>[141]</sup> This self-improvement was in part a response to the supposedly debilitating feminine "cult of domesticity" as well as a strategy for achieving economic success amidst the rise of industrial capitalism. This period saw a national investment in ideas about masculine self-control after Henry Clay valorized the "self-made man" on the Senate floor in 1832.<sup>[151]</sup> Climbing the socioeconomic ladder, experts insisted, required an impressive degree of discipline that included command over one's body. This economic imperative for corporeal self-control coincides, as disability studies scholar Robert McRuer has shown, with the emergence of the term "able-bodiedness," which is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "soundness of health; ability to work; robustness."<sup>[161]</sup> Though Whitman doesn't reference "able-bodiedness," he does use the term "perfect-bodied." Such terminology reflects both the ever unachievable fantasy of Whitman's ideal physique and, because the verb "perfect" implies action, his conviction that such an ideal could be produced through human effort.

In its attempt to produce "live, robust American men," "Manly Health" advances what McRuer calls "compulsory able-bodiedness," which privileges certain bodies and minds as normal based on aesthetics or functionality, and positions others as deviations. Additionally, though Whitman's use of the label "feeble" predates the consolidation of "feeble-mindedness" into a eugenic category, the term was widely used in the mid-nineteenth century to describe people with disabilities.<sup>[171]</sup> Whitman's proto-eugenic language for those lacking idealized health (as well as manliness) denotes his concerns about disability. By offering reading as a means of training the ubiquitous "feeble" male body,

Whitman escalates middle-class ideals about masculine self-help into a comprehensive rehabilitative project.

The compulsory nature of the agenda of "Manly Health" is made explicit by the suggestion that merely reading the text constitutes abiding by its scripts. From its inception, the column is intimately aware of its interactions with readers. The opening line of the first installment addresses the reader as "you whose eye is arrested by the above headlines." The text's title, this introduction implies, acts on the reader, not merely catching his attention, but also immediately ensnaring him in its rehabilitative project. "Manly health!" the column proceeds, "Is there not a kind of charm—a fascinating magic in the word?" The rehabilitation process commences without warning, beginning before the reader has considered the actual health recommendations detailed in the column. According to the second installment, the rest of the title, "Training," has an equally mystical effect. "[T]here we print the magic word," Whitman writes, "that can remedy all the troubles and accomplish all the wonders of human physique!" The effects or "charms" of these words are activated the moment the reader encounters them. They operate according to what Alison Kafer calls "curative time," or an orientation towards disability—what Whitman here calls "troubles"—that "not only expects and assumes intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention."<sup>[18]</sup> Whitman's "magic" diction produces an intensified strain of curative time in which the process of rehabilitation is initiated the very instant it is described.

A similarly immediate and involuntary transformation takes place in Whitman's "Song of Myself."<sup>[19]</sup> Like "Manly Health," the 1856 and 1860 versions of the poem begin with a claim that the text physically alters the reader: "I celebrate myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume/ For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you." Moreover, "Manly Health's" self-proclaimed effect of "arrest[ing]" the reader's "eye" is echoed and elaborated on by the metamorphosis "Song of Myself" supposedly catalyzes. For the reader to "assume" what Whitman's speaker does means not only sharing his knowledge, but also adopting his physical qualities. The command "you shall" makes the impact of text on reader compulsory. As in "Manly Health," it is the reader's contact with the poem, and not an intentional engagement with its content, that initiates physical transformation, here at the molecular level.

"Manly Health" does, however, invite the reader's active participation. Just as Whitman recommends health-promoting dietary, hygienic, and exercise routines, so too does he outline a disciplined engagement with his column. He warns against incomplete reading, advising, "to those of our readers who have seen only partial sections of this series, we can only repeat our charge and wish that they procure the entire series." Echoing an earlier suggestion that all men "form the habit" of a daily swim in order to maximize its health benefits, Whitman advocates for habitual reading of "Manly Health." He also recommends adherence to this practice throughout one's life. As the first installment states, physical training is suited "to all ages of life, from the beginning to

the end of it." "Manly Health" purports to be of value across a similar longevity, requiring of its audience, "the careful reading, once or twice every year, during the remainder of their lives." Similarly, when Whitman invites his readers to heed his advice, he articulates this process as a physical activity, asking readers "to ponder, with all the strength and comprehension of their minds, upon what we are here trying to impress upon them." Comprehending the text apparently requires the very "strength" sought out in other sections of the column, and this "pondering" is also more literally embodied. "We call upon you, reader," Whitman writes, "to mark this, for it is well worth pondering upon." Beyond asking the reader simply to take note, this request invites a physical act where annotation represents assent to instructions the author deems especially important. These carefully prescribed practices suggest that reading "Manly Health" demands the same discipline required by its more conventional prescriptions.

Whitman does not reserve this physically active reading for "Manly Health" alone, but rather promotes a shift in general reading habits. In addition to the metatextual commentary that pervades the column, he also quite literally offers reading aloud as a prescription:

We would recommend every young man to select a few favorite poetical or other passages, of an animated description, and get in the habit of declaiming them, on all convenient occasions—especially when out upon the water, or by the sea-shore, or rambling over the hills on the country [sic]. Let him not be too timid or bashful about this, but throw himself into it with a will. Careful, however, not to overstrain his voice, or scream, for that is not the object that is aimed after. A loud, slow, firm tone, as long as it can be sustained without fatigue, and agreeably to the ear, is the test.

Here reading is presented with the same detail afforded to other "physical exercises" in Whitman's column, as it apparently "helps, indeed, the bodily system in many ways." A far cry from the "not a bit tamed...barbaric yawp" Whitman claims to "sound" in *Leaves of Grass*, this scene of reading aloud requires carefully controlled vocal exertion.

This strict approach to vocalization is not Whitman's own invention, but rather draws on the "vocal gymnastics" described in physician Andrew Comstock's *A System of Vocal Gymnastics, a Key to the Phoneticon* (1854). Proper use of the "vocal organs," Comstock explains, can "invigorate the lungs, and consequently, fortify them against the invasion of disease."<sup>[20]</sup> Much like "Manly Health," Comstock's manual asserts that proper reading can directly affect health. Whitman likely encountered this concept of "vocal gymnastics" (a term Whitman himself never uses) in the work of physician Russell Thacher Trall.<sup>[21]</sup> Between 1855 and 1856, Whitman contributed regular pieces to *Life Illustrated*, the weekly newspaper distributed by his new publishers, Fowler and Wells. Trall served as assistant editor during this period, and Fowler and Wells published Trall's own health manual, *The Family Gymnasium*, in 1857, one year before

"Manly Health" appeared in *The New York Atlas*.<sup>[221]</sup> In a chapter on "Vocal Gymnastics," Trall offers his own "practical hints" with the aim to "improve the respiration and articulation." He advises readers to "declaim in a *loud whisper*," select passages "which require firm and dignified enunciation," and keep the mouth "freely opened" (emphasis original).<sup>[231]</sup> Whitman takes up these guidelines in "Manly Health" by specifying that readers select "animated" texts and "declaim" them at a regulated volume and pitch.

These images of physically active reading by Whitman and others resemble a section added to the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In this first revision, Whitman added a new conclusion to what was then titled "Poem of the Body" (retitled "I Sing the Body Electric" in 1867). In this addition, the speaker addresses his body directly. "Oh my body!" he cries, "...I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems." He then offers an exhaustive taxonomy that begins with body parts such as "[h]ead, neck, hair, ears" and evolves into more active processes. One line in particular, "Food, drink, pulse, digestion, sweat, sleep, walking, swimming," could pass for "Manly Health's" table of contents, as it is only after these have been detailed that the list's final object, "the exquisite realization of health," emerges. The logic of active reading presented in "Manly Health" indicates that long before Whitman had revised the title to its canonical declaration—"I Sing the Body Electric"—he had begun to take stock of the sonic value of his poems. It is not only that the poet, by describing the body, attaches literary value to presumably mundane corporeality. More crucially, the list qualifies as just the kind of "animated description" recommended in "Manly Health" for therapeutic reading aloud, providing insight into the "electric" function Whitman would ascribe to the poem by 1867.<sup>[241]</sup> The poem both sings and invites a range of sonic expressions—what it describes in the 1856 version as "The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting aloud"—to promote an active, enlivening vocalization of its content.

Likewise, when read in light of "Manly Health," Whitman's claim in "Poem of the Body" that the body "shall stand or fall with my poems" reflects contemporary debates about reading posture. In his history of posture, Sander Gilman traces efforts to correct the damage wrought by sedentary reading to Samuel-Auguste Tissot's 1776 volume, *On the Health of Men of Letters*.<sup>[251]</sup> Trall takes up this issue in a section in *The Family Gymnasium* on comportment "during study." He insists, "it ought to be among the first duties of parents and school teachers to guard those under their care against improper attitudes."<sup>[261]</sup> He illustrates this point with juxtaposed sketches of adult men reading while standing (fig. 3). The upright figure, eyes focused ahead, is captioned "standing erect," while the reader with his head and shoulders tilted down toward his book is labeled "malposition in standing," perhaps critiquing bookishness as an antisocial orientation.<sup>[271]</sup> Whitman engages this idealized reading posture when he insists that declamation "provokes the habit of electricity through the frame ... and gives a dash and style to the personality of a man." This association of "frame" and "personality" reflects the Enlightenment-era belief that "'bad' posture incorporated all the negative qualities: illness, ugliness,

immorality, and lack of patriotism.”<sup>[28]</sup> Whitman’s reading prescriptions, then, correct for not only the “feeble” qualities he perceived in American men, but also the potential implications of such disability on “manliness.” Indeed, “Manly Health” at one point defines “manly beauty” as “an *upright* attitude” as well as “the capacity of being agreeable as a companion ... always welcome” (emphasis mine). For Whitman then, erect posture facilitates not only individual able-bodiedness, but also masculine belonging.



3. “Bodily Positions” from page 23 in Russell Thacher Trall’s *the Illustrated Family Gymnasium* (New York: Fowler and Wells, ca. 1857). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. A black and white illustration of two men standing back to back while reading. The figure on the left is titled “STANDING ERECT” and appears upright, his book raised with one hand to chin height. The figure to the right is labeled “MALPOSITION IN STANDING” and is hunched over his book, which he holds with two hands near the middle of his torso.

This link between health and sociality is essential to “Manly Health’s” rehabilitative vision. Whitman describes “a wonderful medicinal effect in the mere personal presence of a man who was perfectly well,” and similarly wonders, “what can be more debilitating than to be continually surrounded by sickly people?” (emphasis original). This logic extends to not only face-to-face interactions, but also those facilitated by text. “Poem of the Body” declares that a “well-made man” “conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more” by simply walking past the speaker. In “Manly Health,” text transmits this “medicinal effect” between men, beginning with the authorial “We” that narrates the series. The plurality of this masculine narrative voice signals the phrenological category of “adhesiveness” that, for Whitman, found its “fullest expression ... in male-male relationships.”<sup>[29]</sup> Claiming physical proximity, this “We” also professes to connect the reader to a presumably healthy collective. “We fancy,” Whitman writes of the column’s reception, “we see the look with

which the phrase is met by many a young man." The community of men is brought, by way of the text, into close contact with readers. "Manly Health" reveals that what Moon calls the "fluid" boundary between bodies in Whitman's text can have therapeutic effects.

This porosity is not without risks, and the supposedly deleterious influences of "sickly people" also extend to literary characters.

There is a class of writers, both in this country and Great Britain, who seem to be doing their best, in their novels, sketches, poems, &c., to present as the models for imitation and approval, a set of sickly milk-and-water men... We hope the young fellows who read our remarks will be on their guard against these writers and their sickly models.

Here Whitman prescribes a strict literary diet, offering instruction not only in *how*, but also *what* to read. "Manly Health" imagines a literacy in which readers expose themselves only to images of healthy embodiment that they intend to emulate. What Byrne Fone terms the "masculine landscapes" of Whitman's writing are populated by able-bodied men, distinct from the feeble populations that dominate both literature and the nation (fig. 4).<sup>[30]</sup> Here the compulsory element of "Manly Health's" able-bodiedness emerges, as there's simply no place for "sickly" figures in Whitman's literary culture. Whitman suggests that only healthy men can produce such edifying representations, and he clearly saw himself as one such writer. The 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* includes a flattering letter from Ralph Waldo Emerson praising Whitman's text as a departure from the prevailing literary models, which he deems plagued by "too much lymph in the temperament." Whitman draws on this assessment in "Manly Health" when he calls for a new cohort of writers to correct—or revise—the errors made by the "modern puny and dandy tribes of literary men" of the time. By diverging from the column's focus on the formation of individual habits to comment on the state of literary culture, Whitman suggests that the production of new texts is key to recuperating able-bodiedness on a national scale.

These nation-altering "Poets to Come," as they are termed in "Chants Democratic," which was added to *Leaves of Grass* in 1860, are also, importantly, described in that poem as a "a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known," highlighting the concerns about progeny and heredity that undergird much of "Manly Health."<sup>[31]</sup> Though it would be more than twenty years before the term "eugenics" was used to describe the practice of selective reproduction in pursuit of genetic homogeneity, "Manly Health's" anxiety about imperfect bodies complements the proto-eugenic language that pervades the column. At one point, Whitman posits that "feeble paternity and maternity" are equally to blame for national deficiency as the prevalence of unhealthy habits. Even beyond this explicit turn to heredity, however, "Manly Health" warns against the reproduction of certain physiques. While selective reading is certainly distinct from selective reproduction, both abide by eugenic logic. For Whitman, one "sickly" body, fictional or otherwise, begets another.<sup>[32]</sup> The then-widespread Lamarckian model of heredity, which

posited that acquired as well as congenital traits could be passed on to one's offspring, is largely compatible with Whitman's rehabilitative vision.



4. Edward William Clay's lithograph "Roper's Gymnasium: 274 Market Street Philadelphia," ca. 1830-1833. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. A black and white scene of a crowded gymnasium. A few men in the foreground appear to be fencing, while others balance on a pommel horse. Many other men hang above them, holding onto various ropes and beams. A crowd of both men and women stand in the background watching the gymnasts.

Whitman ascribes reproductive power to writers as well as to parents. In a section titled, "Birth Influences—Breeding Superb Men," he laments that "there has never yet been found a generation that would shape its course, or give up any of its pleasures, for the greater perfection of the generation which was to follow," implying that the young men who heed his advice have the potential to catalyze such change. Later, however, this logic reappears in the context of literary cultures. Whitman insists that the literary "models" of masculinity available "are not for live, robust American men—and especially not for our youth. A very different pattern indeed is wanted to be placed before the growing generations." With more "robust" images available, he reasons, a healthier nation might emerge. Framing "generation" as a concern of both parentage and literature suggests that transforming the health of American men requires a shift in literary representation and consumption. This link between reproduction and literary production also emerges in the final poem that was added to the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, "So Long!" This original iteration of the poem opens with the declaration, "To conclude—I announce what comes after me,/...I announce greater offspring, orators, days, and then depart."<sup>[331]</sup> The reproductive category of "offspring" quickly morphs into figures resembling the previous "Poets to Come," marking these artists as the speaker's progeny. This "announcement" is, by Whitman's own logic, performative; it not only heralds the emergence of a subsequent generation, but also, in doing so, actually produces it. Here the speaker transmits "every atom" of his body to the reader through the textual "announcement."

Marking his literary descendants as "greater...orators" also positions "So Long!" as a text intended to be spoken aloud, invoking the "declamations" of vocal

gymnastics. While Whitman's description of a sole reader "rambling the hills" conjures the idealized nineteenth-century image of the individualistic frontiersman, the exclamatory "So Long!" implies that these oral poetic productions are social in that they realize the corporeal interactivity of text. One's declamations or "announcements" can be heard and registered by others, whether or not they seek them out. Emerson, the unwitting endorser of the 1856 *Leaves of Grass*, articulates a similar sentiment in the introduction to *Representative Men* (1850) when he writes, "the ideas of the time are in the air, and infect all who breathe it...we learn of our contemporaries, what they know, without effort, and almost through the pores of the skin."<sup>1341</sup> Declaiming does more than fill one's own lungs with air; it allows ideas to circulate and "infect" listeners, whether or not any "effort" is exerted.

This passive, even involuntary consumption of text widens Whitman's audience, a consequence that both affirms and complicates the compulsory nature of able-bodiedness in Whitman's rehabilitative reading. "Manly Health" makes claims of universality that reiterate one of the core concerns in *Leaves of Grass*: "In all people I see myself." The column, too, professes a wide, though sex-specific, audience of "every man, rich or poor, worker or idler." This characteristic expansiveness ultimately challenges the terms of able-bodiedness, even while the text heralds this trait as prerequisite to masculine American identity. While "able-bodiedness" is defined in part as the "ability to work," Whitman includes the "idler" in his readership. This figure also appears in a stanza of "Chants Democratic" that appears only in the 1856 and 1860 versions, which bracket "Manly Health." "His shape arises," the poem declares of the American man, "...worker, idler, citizen, countryman,/... Of pure American breed, of reckless health, his body perfect." This inclusive definition of a "body perfect" subverts the social categories of Whitman's time. Building on McRuer's work on able-bodiedness, Sarah F. Rose's labor history of disability, *No Right to be Idle* (2017), traces the association of ability with productivity to the economic shifts of the mid-nineteenth-century.<sup>1351</sup> Whitman's vision of an able-bodied American male collective, however, paradoxically incorporates the "idler" through his treatment of reading. Though historically associated with leisure and indolence, Whitman presents reading as a form of physical exercise that answers the proto-eugenicist call to improve future "generations" of American men.

This theory of reading allows Whitman's able-bodied collective "We" to be joined imaginatively as well as physically. The famous eleventh section of "Song of Myself" depicts this very process, by describing a scene of "twenty-eight young men bath[ing] by the shore" and a "lady" watching them from a window. This juxtaposition illustrates the ideas about sex difference that birthed the rise of the self-help genre. The isolated "womanly" observer, "hid[den]" in her "fine house," is defined by inactivity: she "hides handsome and richly drest." The bathing men are both part of a community ("all so friendly") and actively engaged in swimming, a practice "Manly Health" calls "one of the most ancient of health-generating and body-perfecting exercises." This set-up introduces a strict binary model of "womanly" idleness and "manly

health" that quickly disintegrates. As the men bathe, "an unseen hand" emerges that "pass[es] over their bodies" and "seizes fast to them" before an invisible figure's chest "puffs and declines" after joining them in their exercise. The "womanly" figure at the window now occupies both her original position and that of the men: "You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room." She is at once idle and immersed in this network marked by physical health, representing the possibility of such flexible identities embedded in "Manly Health's" vision of reading.

"Manly Health" carves out this paradoxical position for its audience. Able-bodiedness, as disability studies scholars have long argued, is not a discrete biological category, but a socially constructed position. By presenting reading as a conduit to able-bodiedness, Whitman's text unwittingly makes this position more accessible, despite insisting on physiological markers such as "herculean strength, suppleness, a clear complexion." The prescriptions detailed in "Manly Health" are exclusive in that they insist on certain pre-existing abilities (i.e. walking) not necessarily required by reading. Of course, these presumptions extend to reading as well, which requires literacy and, in some cases, vision.<sup>[36]</sup> But Whitman's "magic words" might also be "animated" by another's declamation of them, further expanding the possibilities of how reading is accomplished. In this way, "Manly Health" imagines increased, though always incomplete, access to both texts and the position of able-bodiedness.

By presenting literature as rehabilitative, Whitman reconceives of both able-bodied "health" and, as a result, the "manliness" to which it was linked by mid-nineteenth-century self-help culture. What emerges amidst "Manly Health's" insistence on being read by "every man" is akin to Tobin Siebers's "theory of complex embodiment," which straddles social and medical models of disability by "theoriz[ing] the body and its representations as mutually transformative."<sup>[37]</sup> If the reader's capacity or willingness to abide by Whitman's more conventional health instructions is relatively insignificant, then perhaps the embodied actions depicted in "Manly Health" are not prescriptions at all. As Whitman suggests in "Song of Myself," the text is contingent on "every atom" of the reader's body. By using "Manly Health" to restate the relationship between reader and writer, Whitman reveals that instructive texts are subject to the very transformations they seek to impose.

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[1] Walt Whitman, *Manly Health and Training: To Teach the Science of a Sound and Beautiful Body*, ed. Zachary Turpin (New York: Regan Arts, 2017).

[2] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn: Fowler & Wells, 1856).

[3] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings: Authoritative Texts, Journal, Reviews and Posthumous Assessments, Criticism*, 3rd edition., Norton Critical Edition. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 72.

[4] Zachary Turpin, "Introduction," in *Manly Health and Training: To Teach the*

*Science of a Sound and Beautiful Body*, by Walt Whitman, ed. Zachary Turpin (New York: Regan Arts., 2017), 7-9.

[5] M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics, and the Text*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 59.

[6] Jan Todd, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women, 1800-1870* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1998), 176-7.

[7] Orson Squire Fowler and Lorenzo Niles Fowler, *The Illustrated Self-Instructor in Phrenology and Physiology: With One Hundred Engravings, and a Chart of the Character* (Fowler and Wells, 1855), 34.

[8] The 1990s in particular saw a wealth of such readings of Whitman's writing, many of which focus specifically on the sexual implications of such "fluidity" (Moon). Mark Maslan, Michael Moon, and Tenney Nathanson each consider the author's endeavor to project his physical body into his work.

[9] Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 7.

[10] Moon, 3.

[11] James B. Salazar, *Bodies of Reform: The Rhetoric of Character in Gilded Age America*, America and the Long 19th Century (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

[12] A distinction between sex and gender had not yet been introduced in the mid-nineteenth century and a biological understanding of "manly" and "womanly" traits was central to the health recommendations in self-help texts. Therefore, following Kyla Schuller, I use the term "sex" in my discussion of them.

[13] Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Means and Ends: Or, Self-Training*, 2nd ed. (Harper & Brothers, 1842).; Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[14] As Gail Bederman has shown, the term "manliness" predates "masculinity," which came into popular vernacular only in the 1890s (6).

[15] Kimmel, 20.

[16] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (NYU Press, 2006), 7. Variations of "able-bodied," according to the *OED*, appear far earlier, though the now-accepted hyphenated form also emerges in the nineteenth century.

[17] James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[18] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 27.

[19] All quotations from “Song of Myself” (unless specified otherwise) are taken from the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1856. *Leaves of Grass* famously underwent many revisions across the author’s lifetime. In fact, the poem would not take the title “Song of Myself” until the 1881-2 Osgood edition. In 1856, Whitman had given it the title “Poem of Walt Whitman, an American.” I use the title “Song of Myself” here since it has become the most familiar and canonical of the variations.

[20] Andrew Comstock, *A System of Vocal Gymnastics, a Key to The Phoneticon* (Philadelphia, 1854), 4.

[21] Harold Aspiz, “Specimen Days: The Therapeutics of Sun-Bathing,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 1, no. 3 (1983): 49.

[22] Aspiz, 49.

[23] Russel Thacher Trall, *The Illustrated Family Gymnasium*. (New York, 1857), 199. Trall’s exercises are designed for children and drawn from Horace Mann’s work on teaching children to read aloud “rhetorical[ly]” (196). Whitman’s “Manly” variation, however, supplants this classroom instruction with outdoor activity. By resituating reading, he transforms an exercise for children into one that invokes the American idealization of the masculinist frontiersman.

[24] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: W.E. Chapin & Co., Printers, 1867).

[25] Sander L. Gilman, *Stand Up Straight!: A History of Posture* (Reaktion Books, 2018).

[26] Trall, 22.

[27] Trall, 23.

[28] Gilman, 308.

[29] Carmine Sarracino, “Dyspeptic Amours, Petty Adhesiveness, and Whitman’s Ideal of Personal Relations,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 8, no. 2 (October 1, 1990): 85.

[30] Byrne Fone, *Masculine Landscapes: Walt Whitman and the Homoerotic Text*, 1st edition (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992).

[31] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860–1861).

[32] As Turpin notes, “Manly Health” is concerned not only with individual health, but also with racial and national fitness and concerns about heredity were crucial to mid-nineteenth-century ideas about health well before the

eugenic era.

[33] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860–1861).

[34] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1883), 30.

[35] Sarah F. Rose, *No Right to Be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s–1930s* (UNC Press Books, 2017).

[36] Sari Altschuler and David Weimer's 2019 exhibit, "Touch This Page! Making Sense of the Ways We Read" has highlighted the multi-sensory reading practices that emerged in the decades before "Manly Health's" publication, specifically Samuel Gridley Howe's "Boston Line Type," which provided visual as well as tactile access to the text.

[37] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory, Corporealities*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 25.

## Further Reading

Sari Altschuler and David Weimer, "[Touch This Page! Making Sense of the Ways We Read](#)." Accessed April 7, 2019.

Harold Aspiz, "Specimen Days: The Therapeutics of Sun-Bathing." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 1:3 (1983): 48–50.

Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United*

*States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, 1995).

Andrew Comstock, *A System of Vocal Gymnastics, a Key to The Phoneticon* (Philadelphia, 1854).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (1883).

Byrne Fone, *Masculine Landscapes: Walt Whitman and the Homoerotic Text*, 1st edition (Carbondale, Ill., 1992).

Orson Squire Fowler and Lorenzo Niles Fowler, *The Illustrated Self-Instructor in Phrenology and Physiology: With One Hundred Engravings, and a Chart of the Character* (1855).

Sander L. Gilman, *Stand Up Straight!: A History of Posture* (London, 2018).

Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, Ind., 2013).

- Jimmie Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics, and the Text*, N Reprint edition (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991).
- Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd edition (New York, 2011).
- Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York, 2006).
- Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).
- Sarah F. Rose, *No Right to Be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s–1930s* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2017).
- James B. Salazar, *Bodies of Reform: The Rhetoric of Character in Gilded Age America* (New York, 2010).
- Carmine Sarracino, "Dyspeptic Amours, Petty Adhesiveness, and Whitman's Ideal of Personal Relations." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 8: 2 (October 1, 1990): 76–91.
- Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, N.C., 2017).
- Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Means and Ends: Or, Self-Training* (1842).
- Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2008).
- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings: Authoritative Texts, Journal, Reviews and Posthumous Assessments, Criticism*, third edition (New York, 2008).
- Jan Todd, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women, 1800-1870* (Macon, Ga., 1998).
- Russell Thacher Trall, *The Illustrated Family Gymnasium* (New York, 1857).
- James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind a History of Mental Retardation in the United States* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994).
- Zachary Turpin, "Introduction" in *Manly Health and Training: To Teach the Science of a Sound and Beautiful Body* (1858), by Walt Whitman, 1–19. Ed. Zachary Turpin (New York, 2017).
- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings* (New York, London, 2002).
- . *Leaves of Grass* (1860) Thayer and Eldridge, 1860.

—. *Manly Health and Training: To Teach the Science of a Sound and Beautiful Body*. Edited by Zachary Turpin (New York, 2017).

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### **About the Author**

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