

# Whitman's Good Life



Walt Whitman, *Manly Health and Training*. To Teach the Science of a Sound and Beautiful Body. New York: Regan Arts, 2017. 215 pp., \$25.95

"Fitter, happier / More productive"—a cybernated voice famously intones in Radiohead's 1997 gem *Ok Computer*.<sup>[1]</sup> Seeking an antidote to the post-Fordist dystopia condensed in these lines, one may easily conjure up Walt Whitman. Doing so would entail upholding the poet's fleshliness over Radiohead's disembodied speaker, his outpouring of vibrant free verse over the song's automated string of decontextualized phrases, a leisurely stroll around Manhattan over thirty minutes of treadmill, nation over corporation, pleasure over efficiency. *Manly Health and Training*, Whitman's lost and recovered fitness guide, troubles this approach and, with it, certain ingrained protocols for reading and teaching the Gray Bard as a sempiternal bohemian.<sup>[2]</sup> This breakthrough addition to Whitman's corpus refocuses his personal, poetic, and political vision while enriching current debates over masculinity, disability, affect, and the medical-industrial complex. It opens up new engagements with *Leaves of Grass*, helping us chart the influence, during the 1840s and 50s, of what Paul Starr has described as a battle among quacks, advertisers, folk

doctors, and accredited physicians over “the right to practice medicine as an inalienable liberty” in the United States.<sup>[3]</sup> Whitman wanted in. No less importantly, his contributions to pivotal debates over the meaning of health did not vanish with the nineteenth century. *Manly Health* predicts and propels neoliberal fantasies of the good life that have rendered health a performative site of capitalist consumption.

Signing as Mose Velsor (his mother’s surname), Whitman delivered this treatise on male self-improvement in thirteen installments, published in the *New York Atlas* between September 12 and December 26, 1858. In 2016 Zachary Turpin located the series in an obscure microfilm. It appeared shortly after in a special issue of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*. In 2017, Turpin published a neatly edited volume of the series, enlivened by a prologue as well as an array of photographs, advertisements, and illustrations from 1850s printscapes. Although not a full-fledged critical edition in the manner of Christopher Castiglia and Glenn Hendler’s take on *Franklin Evans*, this book will entice critics and readers alike.<sup>[4]</sup> Those unfamiliar with antebellum print cultures may sample *Manly Health*’s original media environment, while literary scholars and historians will no doubt be spurred to connect the dots between these articles and antebellum health cultures, other works by Whitman, and pretty much everything in Barnes & Noble’s “Diet, Health & Fitness” alley.

To start with the obvious: given the centrality of bodies in *Leaves of Grass*, a newly discovered guide to health by Whitman feels nothing short of providential. Here is the quintessential poet of the body weighing in on power walks, emetics, dumbbells, and oatmeal, seemingly lifting the curtain over his grappling with the corporeal and venturing into the nitty-gritty of daily self-care. Truth is, *Manly Health* oscillates between a supplement and a counterweight to Whitman’s magnum opus. If “Song of Myself” wonders “How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?”, *Manly Health* reminds us that beef indeed we should eat—“cooked rare, without grease.” This and similar specifications configure a practical—not exegetical—interplay between both texts. Whereas the miracle of human deglutition and nourishment inspires both, the latter’s repertoire of dietary restrictions, training tactics, and ergonomic tips further illuminates the scientific and popular discourses informing Whitman’s views on health and, by extension, his poems’ bodily inflections. Consequently, Whitman’s “health manifesto,” [as it has been called](#), best reenergizes our analyses of his poetry indirectly, by suggesting additional sources and influences.

This is not to say that those invested in *Leaves of Grass*’s textual genealogy will not find new leads here. Case in point: the line “I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,” from the *Calamus* poem later titled “For You O Democracy” (1860 edition), signifies differently once traced back to Whitman’s rant against indigestion, an American pandemic without which “we should probably see the most splendid and majestic nation of men, in their physique, that ever trod the earth!” Other times, occasional outbursts of homoeroticism resonate with Whitman’s trademark anatomies: “Look at the brawny

muscles attached to the arms of that young man . . . Look at the spread of his manly chest, on which also are flakes of muscle."

Similar moments of catalogic and sensual excess defy Whitman's self-restraint ethos, advancing a key paradox: he rarely wrote the way he worked out. Whitman's prose, unlike the systematic training plan it articulates, is highly digressive, with themes and motifs vanishing and returning through a logic of contiguity, opposition, and free association bound to test readers' patience. He was too busy—an excuse that personal trainers today love to hate. As Turpin explains, 1858 found the poet scrambling over endless journalistic assignments in order to support himself toward *Leaves of Grass*'s third edition. Whitman himself makes no secret of the fact that he churned out these articles on the go: "[W]e only throw out our views, as the Tartar shoots his arrow, passing along at full speed." *Manly Health* surely bears the marks of a hasty, bill-paying job; however, there may be something of a method in its hurry. For starters, its impromptu quality echoes what we encounter in "Song of Myself" or *Democratic Vistas*. More interestingly, Whitman seems overinvested in explaining and legitimating his principle of composition: "Disconnected as our mode of writing has been... the reader who peruses one article only, will not see the drift of our writing." Like *Leaves of Grass*, *Manly Health* is meant as a fluid whole, which Whitman can only achieve through endless loops and iterations. Whitman scholars and *Leaves of Grass* variorum experts will then have the final say on whether the scatteredness of *Manly Health* results from the pressures of newspaper publication or if, on the contrary, this work embodies (and expands) Whitman's organicism.

Inconsistencies do not end at the structural level. A yin to *Leaves of Grass*' "disorderly fleshy" yang, *Manly Health*'s emphasis on chastity, frugality, and self-discipline counters the absorptive, appetite-driven persona often associated with Whitman. He who once loafed at ease now scolds "the idler, without object, without direction ... apt to brood himself into some moral or physical fever." He who told readers to surrender to "the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life" now defends harsher routines: rise at dawn, bathe in cold water, rub your skin with a coarse towel. The tension between askesis in *Manly Health* and indulgence elsewhere in Whitman's oeuvre is indeed generative and worthy of commentary; nonetheless, it also risks obscuring fascinating internal contradictions, along with the new questions and complications they bring to Whitman studies.

For example, if this is a case study in antebellum pseudoscience, as Turpin contends, where does science end and the "pseudo" begin? Differently put, why does Whitman dispel medical authority ("technical nonsense") while remaining conversant with scientific publications? A detailed look reveals that *Manly Health* strives to democratize, rather than boycott, the medical profession. Health, for Whitman, deserved a shared lexicon to which every American man should be able to contribute. In his original advertisement for the series, Whitman assured prospective readers: "These articles are for *the People* . . . Technical and medical terms are avoided." An "outsider" to the medical

establishment, Whitman situates himself closer to the masses than a “medical man—for who ever knew one of the latter to write a treatise, except its main direction were to the medical fraternity more than any others?” The problem, then, was not praxis as much as rhetoric, since physicians’ increasingly arcane communications had started to alienate the beneficiaries of their efforts.

Through an exuberant yet personable prose, Whitman builds a charismatic persona capable of bridging this gap. To err on a presentist analogy: he speaks in full influencer mode. Unlike medical researchers, snake-oil entrepreneurs, and gym owners, he is neither a creator nor a producer. Influencers influence.

Mediation is their product. In Whitman’s case, this means selecting bits and pieces from an amalgam of health-related discourses and claiming the right to organize them into a medical pedagogy of his own. Seen thus as an effort to harmonize institutional and popular science, *Manly Health and Training* offers one evocative example of what Sari Altschuler has described as a nineteenth-century “medical imagination,” characterized by a synthesis of empirical and humanistic epistemologies.<sup>[51]</sup>

This line of inquiry evinces that, [against what has already been claimed](#), *Manly Health* should be taken as more than a mere coda for *Leaves of Grass*. Hoping to reorient this reception, I enumerate here a few additional paradoxes calling for further analysis: is not Whitman’s “*rational and elevated system of MANLY TRAINING*” (italics in the original) at odds with his goal of arousing “the animal part of a man”? Is not his admonition of “putting on airs” at odds with his pervasive alpha-maleness? How does he negotiate his intensely nationalistic project with a global frame of comparison in which the United States often lags behind healthier nations? How do we balance his praise for the Scandinavian stock of “the English race” with his recognition of South Sea Islanders, on the opposite end of the Earth, as the “finest and best developed forms to be found in any portion of the human race”? And what about women, who only enter these pages as prostitutes threatening—and yet indispensable to—the reproduction of national health?

At the center of this wheel of opposites sits Whitman’s plea for “a revolution of habits,” an oxymoronic phrase that encapsulates the irony of pursuing health in structurally unhealthy times. Of course, habits can be revolutionized, but are they also revolutionary? Is not a habit, by the sheer nature of its repetition, doomed to lose its world-shattering force? Take Whitman’s (nonrevolutionary) advice to clerks and other office workers. Even though he regrets the injuries sedentary labor had started to inflict in their bodies and minds, his measures are always palliative, never oppositional: “Early rising, early to bed, exercise, plain food, thorough and persevering continuance in gently-commenced training, the cultivation with resolute will of a cheerful temper.” Whitman’s “cheerfulness” prophesies our adherence to a world of New Year’s resolutions, power naps, and [laughter-inducing salads](#), a world of consumerist solutions to consumerism-derived problems. In this world, as in Whitman’s, self-discipline begets social discipline; popular discourses of health and productivity fuel illusions of sovereign agency that distract us

from conditions of exploitation and privation. For all its utopian projections and postponements of gratification, *Manly Health* presents health as a mechanism whose mastery imbues individuals with the illusion of shaping aesthetic, political, moral, literary, and economic life in the United States. Good health wins friends and influences people—to riff on Dale Carnegie’s classic proposition. Magnetism, as conceptualized in a key entry, derives not from innate charm or the lucky end of the gene pool, but from sustained behaviors and privations central to Whitman’s notion of self-fulfillment. These privations are also monetary. When Whitman labels health “an investment that pays better than any other,” he is not being metaphorical. Health is never only about itself; it allegedly modulates every other domain in social life.

Pondering Whitman’s advice, one wonders: what fantasies do these habits nurture? And why are these fantasies endlessly protracted by the habits that buttressed them in the first place? These questions render *Manly Health* presciently relevant to post-WWII affective attachments to capitalist success, especially as theorized by Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Jasbir Puar, among others.<sup>[61]</sup> Indeed, the confluence of affect theory, new materialisms, and transnational critiques of neoliberalism in recent disability studies work makes this an optimal moment for *Manly Health* to arrive. For all the historicization it elicits, Whitman’s text also adumbrates a present-day “neoliberal biopolitics” that, according to David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, “references all bodies as deficient and in need of product supplementations to treat the in-built inferiority within.”<sup>[71]</sup> As neoliberalism gradually replaces the disability of a minority with the “debility” of the majority via regimes of compulsory consumption, indebtedness, and technologization, one productive strategy toward *Manly Health* is to see Whitman pioneering contemporary fantasies of the good life.<sup>[81]</sup> Tita Chico, in her study of eighteenth-century civil society, claims that what we call “good life” today, in the face of postindustrial capitalism and the nation-state’s diminished hegemony, already constituted “a compensatory image for all it excludes” during the Enlightenment and after.<sup>[91]</sup> In *Manly Health*, Whitman subjects antebellum Americans to analogous patterns of promise and negation.

To brand Whitman an uncritical champion of the good life does not constitute an end in itself as much as a way of tracking down the antagonisms and exclusions sustaining this construct. Of special interest here is the convergence of health and aesthetics. If “[b]eauty is simply health and a sound physique,” ugliness brands the unhealthy, those who fail to exert self-control and shape individual and collective destiny through their bodies. And so, Whitman flirts with eugenics—“Life without a sound body. What is it good for?”—by deliberately mixing looks and abilities: “no blotched and disfigured complexion—no prematurely lame and halting gait—no tremulous shaking of the hand, unable to carry a glass of water to the mouth without spilling it.” Ardently as the Whitman of 1858 appears to envision an impairment-free America, though, it would be more accurate to say he celebrates the body-in-flux over the fantasy of herculean immunity. In his apologia for prize fighting, in which he exults in the body’s capacity to endure a harsh beating, and in his glorification of



working-class children, who man up without being “killed by kindness,” Whitman dreams of suffering rather than infallible bodies. Human mutability—not perfection—focalizes his project. The resultant tension between a projected utopia of health and a future in which American bodies still get visibly hurt unsettles the evident ableism of the text and poses a suggestive conundrum to scholars in disability studies and the medical humanities.

In sum, because it operates as a repository of antebellum medical practices and a glimpse toward the meanings health accrues in our neoliberal moment, *Manly Health* is best approached as a product of its era that also wishes to produce our own. For every preposterous suggestion (e.g. ban shaving), Whitman foresees a current health crisis. References to food safety, anti-vaxxers, and sports-related concussions insinuate potential connections with twenty-first-century cable news, lifestyle vlogs, and *Men’s Health* editorials. At a time when education institutions aim to teach “the whole person,” we notice Whitman already summoning teachers to tend to “bodily, mental, and moral developments . . . the only way, indeed, in which training can be just to the whole man.” Discussions of customized shoes, fitting garments, and skincare reveal Whitman’s proto-metropolitanism, partly understood as his awareness that health was becoming increasingly performative, a trait legible by one’s access to commodities and services. The book’s exuberant use of images underscores this point. Nonetheless, if one were to signal a flaw in this edition, these images are ornamental at best, confusing at worst. Lack of immediate contextualization for the volume’s visual apparatus matters because Whitman’s stance regarding these graphic materials—be they advertisements, calisthenics manuals, or sketches of New York City life—remains unstable, shifting from endorsement to ferocious renunciation.

This latest incorporation into the Whitman canon constitutes a complex aesthetic and political intervention, both in and of itself and in relation to *Leaves of Grass*. For anyone in the practice of extending and refining the substantial scholarship on Whitman’s conceptions of the body, *Manly Health* represents an obliged stop. Given its proto-neoliberal framing of medicine, this text should also matter to anyone interested in the historical entwinement of U.S. cultures of self-care, health, and capitalism. The strategic parallelism in “no pain, no gain,” a motto popularized by Jane Fonda in her epochal aerobics videos, famously presents a Reaganite economy otherwise premised on the unequal social distribution of pains and gains as optimal and intrinsically fair. *Manly Health and Training* espouses a similar ethos, but it does so with less balance. Its chaotic mode of presentation, unsolved paradoxes, and key omissions ultimately enable a critique of the normative compulsion to be fitter, happier, and more productive than and now.

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[1] “Fitter Happier,” compact disc, track 7 on Radiohead, *Ok Computer*, Parlophone, 1997.

[2] *Manly Health and Training* thus substantiates Edward Whitley and Joanna Levin's insinuation that, despite Whitman's immersion in New York City's bohemian scene during the late 1850s, the poet never gave up his desire to connect with bourgeois America. See Edward Whitley and Joanna Levin, "Introduction," in *Whitman among the Bohemians*, ed. Edward Whitley and Joanna Levin (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2014), xi-xiv.

[3] Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine. The Rise of a Sovereign Profession and the Making of a Vast Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 31.

[4] See Christopher Castiglia and Glenn Hendler, "Introduction," in Walt Whitman, *Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate. A Tale of the Times*, ed. Christopher Castiglia and Glenn Hendler (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), ix-lvii. An extended version of Turpin's introduction is available at the *WWQR* Website. See Zachary Turpin, "[Introduction to Walt Whitman's 'Manly Health and Training.'](#)" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 33 (2016), 147-183.

[5] Sari Altschuler, *The Medical Imagination: Literature and Health in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 2-5.

[6] A minimal bibliography on this front includes Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011); Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017); and José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

[7] David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 39-40.

[8] On the question of debility as a reframing of disability in neoliberal times, see Puar, 16-17; and Mitchell and Snyder, 12.

[9] Tita Chico, "Civil Society and Its Discontents: The Good Life." *Eighteenth Century: Theory & Interpretation*, 55, no. 1 (Spring 2014), 99.

[www.whitmanbicentennialalessays.com](http://www.whitmanbicentennialalessays.com)

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