

Franklin, Emerson, Whitman, and the American Bible

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I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk
of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.
-Walt Whitman, from *Song of Myself*

Most Walt Whitman scholars can point to old Hebraic verse patterns as at least one of Whitman's influences for his free versed poetry with his signature long lines and catalogues. Whitman was quoted many times as wanting to create the "American Bible." Though *Leaves of Grass* may not be viewed as the American Bible by most Americans—in truth, most Americans may not even recognize the title or its author according to E.D. Hirsch (*Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*) and Harold Bloom (*The Western Canon*)—it has become the American Bible of poets. One cannot be an American poet without at least acknowledging the influence of Whitman. Likewise, one cannot be an American philosopher and scholar without acknowledging the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and one could hardly be an American at all without at least the most rudimentary knowledge of the life and deeds of Benjamin Franklin (I am afraid recognizing him as "the guy on the one hundred dollar bill" or "that guy with the kite and the key" does qualify as rudimentary). In their own ways, each of these men left Americans "instructions" on how to be uniquely American. Like the writers of the Bible, these men were motivated by a desire to nurture and grow "their people," to guide them "through the wilderness" as it were,

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and, in spite of our post-Derridian inclinations to move away from some centralized idea of who and what we are, we seem to continue to be under the influence of America's very own "prophets"—and, I would argue, we could do with a bit more of the influence of Franklin, Emerson, and Whitman; we could benefit by gleaning the old truths from the American Bible.

The American Bible

To the garden the world anew ascending,
Potent mates, daughters, sons, precluding,
The love, the life of their bodies, meaning and being,
Curious here behold my resurrection after slumber
-Walt Whitman, from *To the Garden the World*

The idea of creating a "Bible" that is "uniquely American" seems to date back as far as the Puritans and Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity," but Whitman's inspiration more likely sprang from reading or hearing Ralph Waldo Emerson ask for a new American voice:

The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? (Introduction 3)

Emerson's introduction to *Nature* seems so desperate from the vantage point of those of us who have since lived through the varying stages of America's exceptionalism, our "manifest destiny," and even Winthrop's Biblical idea of us as "a city on a hill" (now more often attributed to President Reagan). It is nearly impossible for most of us to remember a time when Americans were more likely to read an English author than an American one, when Americans were more likely to quote a French or German philosopher than an American celebrity. Today, we assume that our nationalism is something that has "always been" and, as such, we feel the need to rebel against it—to not only question it, but to abhor it. However, pride in one's nation does not have to be an "us against the world" dogma (which, by the way, is hardly unique to the United States), but it can, as Whitman put it, "contain multitudes" of healthy attitudes about just what does set one people apart from another. Like the nation of Israel described in the Old Testament, the United States was born and built in unique circumstances. It should be no surprise that those circumstances produced some extremely unique men with unique ideas that we

should embrace— embrace them as “American” and continue to be fascinated by our own heritage, certainly mindful of mistakes, but also proud of successes, proud of those “founding fathers” who, not without their faults, were still our fathers, our predecessors who were diligent in leaving us directions in how to be American.

Man Working

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon

-Walt Whitman, from *For You O Democracy*

Perhaps the most famous of those founding fathers is Benjamin Franklin whose writings in his own time, particularly the many versions of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, offered Americans a hint at what an “American Bible” might look like. Taking a note from King Solomon (and no doubt plagiarizing the scriptures), Franklin gave American’s “proverbs” that have become so ingrained in our culture that many Americans often mistake sayings of Franklin for actual biblical verse; one of these more famous inaccuracies is *Poor Richard's* advice that, “God help’s those who help themselves” (Franklin 176). However, *Poor Richard's Almanac* is only a small portion of Franklin’s philosophical influence on American culture; it is *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* that coalesces Franklin’s life work and his philosophical quips into a collection akin to David’s *Book of Psalms* and Solomon’s *Proverbs* created initially for his son, but has since guided Americans in what we think of as far as “virtue” and “success.” Franklin was telling his son “how to live” but the virtues and the attitudes of this book seem to define what it is to be an American—particularly in industry and society. Franklin filtered the “Puritan work ethic” into palatable and friendly “advice” and he challenged Americans to see themselves outside of their “class”—as worthy of wealth as the next person, and more so if they worked harder than the next person. He was a radical who Whitman could not help but admire and emulate:

[Whitman] saw Franklin as the epitome of American rugged individualism in the face of European stiffness and conformity. In his Camden conversations with his friend Horace Traubel, he described Franklin as an American who remained independent and defiantly casual in foreign contexts. ‘There was Franklin,’ he declared. ‘He set the teeth of the French court on edge: his wonderful exceptionalness from the ways of other men – the daring liberties he took – allowed to him probably because of his magnificent personal magnetism.’ Franklin, Whitman said, embodied ‘the American *I am*’ (Reynolds 30)

Benjamin Franklin, according to Whitman, was deliberate in setting himself apart—particularly when he would journey abroad. He created a character of himself that, to the French and the English, embodied all that they wanted to believe about America. America was an enigma to the European mind and Franklin—by ways of gauche manners and fur caps—played up to the idea of the vulgar and rustic frontiersman, while maintaining the mystique that “such men” could also be witty, charming, and incomparably intelligent:

Who better than the figure of a Benjamin Franklin could assist the development of an American imagined community along these particular lines of nationalist descent? The figure of a Franklin, born in Boston of English parents, signals the richness of a Puritan dissenting past that, over time, adapted and changed into what U.S. citizens still consider to be a foundation of what is truly ‘American’ about American culture. And Franklin did, like Whitman, depart in a variety of ways from typical cultural norms dominant in his time. (Mulford 15)

In essence, Franklin was revealing to the Europeans exactly what they feared and simultaneously longed to see—a “new man” formed from the best of Europe melded to the best of the wild American frontier; “clearly, the body and life of Franklin were serving as the figural body of the nation, where the qualities of the individual man and the accumulated merits demonstrated in his philosophical and scientific expertise became identifiable and emulable qualities that entered the discourse of the nationhood of ‘America’” (Mulford 423). In his *Autobiography*, Franklin describes his consciousness of creating his image in the public eye—he relates to his son, William, the story of how he strove to make people see him as industrious:

I took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious & frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances* of the contrary. I drest plainly; I was seen at no Places of idle Diversion; I never went out a-fishing or shooting; a Book, indeed, sometimes debauch’d me from my Work; but that was seldom, snug, & gave no Scandal; and to show that I was not above my Business, I sometimes brought home the Paper I purchas’d at the Stores, thro’ the Streets on a Wheelbarrow. Thus being esteem’d an industrious thriving young Man, and paying duly for what I bought, the Merchants who imported Stationary solicited my Custom, others propos’d supplying me with Books, & I went on swimmingly. (Franklin 82)

Of course, it is easy to see how Whitman, in his public appearances and

numerous posed photographs, followed Franklin's example in creating a character of himself. If we are to consider Franklin as one of the authors of the American Bible, it is worth noting that the *influence* of what he wrote is much more important than the recognition that he was the one who wrote it; whether or not a person actually acts as "a good Samaritan" or whether or not a person "loves his neighbor as he loves himself" seems to be much more important than knowing that it was Luke who was quoting Jesus and Moses writing Leviticus (or Jesus quoting Moses). What is perhaps harder to see is how Franklin's example, whether we acknowledge it or not, has persisted and has been reborn again and again in those industrious and self-made persons who populate the American memory—Thomas Edison, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, Walt Disney, Lee Iacocca—all models of "American ingenuity," "American genius," and "American gumption," all understanding that "Sloth, like Rust, consumes faster than Labour wears" and "Early to Bed, early to rise, makes a Man healthy, wealthy, and wise" and all probably unawares of the source of their American idealism, unawares of Benjamin Franklin's own hand in not only accomplishing the "American Dream," but defining that dream for every generation of Americans born in his shadow (Franklin 176).

What is particularly endearing about Franklin is that his intent, so far as we can conjecture from his many volumes of notes and, of course, from his *Autobiography* specifically, was not "to cast a giant shadow" and produce generation after generation of Americans suffering from what Bloom calls an "anxiety of influence," but to offer himself as a broken and flawed example that any American could not only aspire to, but surpass with hard work, diligence, and talent. In this way, Franklin again mirrors the good old kings, David and Solomon, who are celebrated as much for their brokenness as they are for their greatness, because they demonstrate the providence of God; Franklin, too, demonstrates "providence" and offers himself as a model to his nation. Steven Forde, in his article "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin and the Education of America," explains, the Franklin of the *Autobiography* is neither a classical hero nor a saint; but he does embody an ideal of a distinctly modern and democratic sort. In fact, those parts of the *Autobiography's* teaching that are most decried as vulgar or materialistic stem from Franklin's deep egalitarianism. He gives scope to the American impulse for material advancement (which it would not be possible or fair to suppress); but he gives that impulse a push in the direction of virtue and moderation, understood to be sure in a distinctive way. Equally important, he gives Americans an ideal of democratic public service that is quite high-minded, without being beyond the grasp of ordinary citizens. Franklin goes so far as to downplay in the *Autobiography* elements of his own history that are beyond the reach of ordinary human beings" (Forde 358). The egalitarianism that Forde points out in Franklin is exactly what seems to align him

with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. Emerson and Whitman, a hundred years after Franklin, continue to guide Americans in what is ultimately a “spiritual journey” of self-discovery (of recognizing “who I am in American” and “what am I as an American”) with their contributions, their own “books” in the American Bible – Emerson through his public lectures and Whitman through his *Leaves of Grass*.

Man Thinking

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years

-Walt Whitman, from *There Was a Child Went Forth*

After an entire generation grew up under the influence of Franklin's Autobiography (including the thirteen “virtues” laid out in Part Two) America, as is often the case, began to believe her own hype. Like the Israelites in the desert, we went astray (which, of course, becomes a pattern... *just* as it was with Moses' followers). American's threw off the initial Puritanical desire to be known for our religious virtues and, instead, embraced the idea of being a beacon to the world in quite a different way—the world would know them for their economic know-how, their work ethic, and that same imagined “ruggedness” that Franklin worked so hard to present to England and France. It is no wonder that Ralph Waldo Emerson would come along and point out that a nation full of inventors, entrepreneurs, and, essentially, “mini-Franklins” was almost devoid of real intellectuals and philosophers.

Emerson's disappointment is palpable in his writing, as if he has just come down from the mountain to see “the chosen people” gallivanting around a golden calf. He points out in *The American Scholar* that “meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given; forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books” (Emerson 47). *The American Scholar* is Emerson's wake-up call to each individual American or as Robert D. Richardson Jr. puts in his book *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*,

Emerson's audience [for his initial delivery of “The American Scholar”] was not the assembly of judges, professors, ministers, school-board members, and other persons who has been institutionalized. It was, as it henceforward would be, the single hearer, the solitary reader, the friend – unknown but always singular – who felt and still may feel personally addressed and shaken by the collar when encountering Emerson's startling observation.

(Richardson, Jr. 265)

Like Franklin, Emerson saw something lacking in America – specifically that America needed an intellectual culture to call her own—and he decided that he was just the man to show America, once again, “how to be.” In David S. Reynolds’ sweeping history of the American Renaissance, he reveals a much more self-assured and even “cocky” Emerson than most of us are familiar with:

As early as 1820, Emerson had announced in his journal: ‘My talents (according to the judgment of friends or the whispered suggestions of vanity) are popular, are fitted to enable me to claim a place in the inclinations & sympathy of men.’ He even had a secret desire for mass popularity, as was suggested in an 1827 journal entry in which he confessed: ‘I do not fully disclaim the vulgar hunger to be known, to have one’s name hawked in the great capitals in the street.’ His instinctive openness to American popular culture proved to be a major reason for the development of his mature style. It led eventually to his definition of the genius of the *representative man*, the one who most successfully absorbed even the most vulgar of trivial interests of his countrymen (Reynolds 485).

Emerson saw a way that America could claim a place among the scholars of Europe by finding a “scholarship” in the nature around them, by developing what he referred to as “their own relationship with the universe.” America was unique from the “old world” in that it was still largely untouched, there were still enormous portions of land untouched by man. Emerson wanted the Americans on the coast – those ever-looking toward Europe for inspiration and those most separated from the wilderness of the west – to turn their attention inward. He wanted Americans to not only be the “rugged” *working* peoples of this new country, but to become the “rugged” *intellectuals*, as well. It was high time, as Emerson saw it, for America to “put aside childish ways” and grow into the nation and people it was capable of becoming.

His desire to teach Americans “how to be” was so great that he would establish an intense calendar of public lectures across the country that seemed to mirror a religious revival; “in the more democratic learning situation that characterized lyceums and public lectures Emerson brought culture to the nation by means of an evangelical medium” (Field 473). Emerson’s lectures were popular, even if he, like Franklin and Whitman, would seem to contradict himself or would use obscure tropes that even modern scholars have trouble parsing. Like Franklin and Whitman, part of Emerson’s appeal was his continual questioning of even his own ideas, his

willingness to rethink philosophical assumptions. In his essay, “The Four Faces of Emerson,” Robert E. Spiller observes that, “Perhaps we look to [Emerson] rather because he confronted the confused complexity that our national experience really is and learned a way – not to solve its problems or to preach its message—but to live with it and inwardly to reflect its diverse character” (4). I would agree with Spiller that Emerson at least “appears” to be confused, but I would assert that Emerson was absolutely “preaching” a message that, even in his supposed confusion, continues to reappear again and again in his writings. I believe that Emerson’s supposed “confusion” is the same type of self-effacing act that the apostle Paul performs in the New Testament when he says that “of all the sinners, I am the worst.” Certainly there is a humility in Paul’s and Emerson’s words, but they are both essentially “working the audience” and getting down to the reader’s level so that they are more empathetic and, thus, more convincing.

Emerson wanted the American intellect to be distinct from the European in its spontaneity; he wanted Americans to take their philosophical cues from nature – for ideas to come organically and be embraced and put to use before they were “put to the committee” of an imagined intelligentsia of the old world. Emerson’s first essay, *Nature*, spells out his ideas about how Americans can use the land around them to become the new poets and philosophers he hoped to see; “not known for his irony, Emerson opens his first major philosophical essay with a strategic irony whereby he simultaneously exalts Nature and denigrates all Art save his own. Nature swiftly mythicizes the natural given while dwarfing everything factitious” (Marr 43).

Emerson’s focus on the uses of the natural world is absolutely apparent all over Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, but the idea seems to have resonated throughout American literary history, from Emily Dickinson to Mark Twain to Stephen Crane and all the way through the naturalists Edith Wharton, John Steinbeck and Jack London. Everything we need to know about ourselves and about the universe, Emerson points out again and again in his lectures, is all around us. Nature is the teacher – the American land is the schoolroom; we need not long for the ancient libraries of Europe when our intellects could be sustained by nature herself, by America herself. *Quit looking back towards Egypt, when the promised land is just ahead!* Emerson’s point of view is, of course, romantic and, if followed to the letter, would almost certainly create intellectuals who were “less than” their European counterparts – intellectuals who, unlike Emerson, would not be able to rattle off a list of names like Bacon, Cicero and Locke. Perhaps it is the realization of Emerson’s seeming contradictions that has shifted focus away from him in American classrooms.

It is hard to point out just why or when Ralph Waldo Emerson went from

being America's model philosopher to a becoming more of a footnote in American studies, but, as Len Gougen observes in a new collection of essays on Emerson, many scholars are "convinced that [Emerson's] influence will carry over into the twenty-first century. Those who might find Emerson's transcendental writings to be oblique or obscure, with little relationship to the world as we know it, should simply read his philosophical essays in conjunction with his antislavery and reform writings. The latter to demonstrate how Emerson 'put his creed into his deed'" (174). Unlike Franklin, Emerson is prickly and we tend to want to skip over him, but, if we are to be good Americans, if we are to be *whole* Americans, we need them both. Franklin is very much like *The Psalms* and we tend to want to grab him and feel good about ourselves; Emerson, of course, is like Paul's letters – haunting, incriminating, and frustrating, but also complex and beautiful, completely heartfelt, and clearly "instructional." Together, Franklin and Emerson seem to celebrate the *idea* of the American and the idea of America; Walt Whitman contributes the reality of those ideals in all of their "naked" horror and glory.

Man Singing

Be composed – be at ease with me – I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty
as Nature,
Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,
Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to rustle for you,
do my words refuse to glisten and rustle for you.

-Walt Whitman, from *To a Common Prostitute*

When we approach Walt Whitman within the theme of the American Bible, it is difficult to avoid overstatement and what some might consider blasphemy, but I think, if we are looking for correlations between *the* Bible and the American Bible, we *have* to compare Whitman to Jesus. At its very basic level, the Bible is attractive to us because of Jesus; he is not only the story of redemption, but he is the story of *our* redemption. Perhaps it is not an "American trait" that can be blamed on Franklin, Emerson, or Whitman, but we do tend to give in to our solipsism—we are absolutely giddy when we can see ourselves in what we read. To this end, Franklin and Emerson offer us glimpses of our potential, but Whitman says, "this is *you*" and, what is more, he is right. Whitman is welcoming and all-encompassing. You hear about him and you think the reports are crazy, but then you encounter him and you understand that he "gets you" and, because you (as a self-centered American) dig that, you are willing to listen. None of this, it seems, was accidental. As Floyd Stoval points out,

Whitman has a clear purpose in his writing:

The genius of the United States, Whitman said in his first Preface, is not most or best in its educated classes but in its common people; in their manners, speech, and dress, in their love of freedom and self-esteem, and in their largeness of soul that is in keeping with the largeness of nature. The genius of the American poet is to be commensurate with the people and their land. The poet, not the President, is their representative and proper spokesman. (52)

Like Jesus with the tax collectors and the prostitutes, Whitman allows for the “imperfect” in the American; he even allows for each individual American to add to the definition of what it is to be American rather than subscribe to a list of virtues or strive towards a perfect soul. Whitman proclaims the value and worth of every American, regardless of the attributes that are used to classify and marginalize one American from another, both in his time and on through present day America. In *The Sleepers*, he joins the men and the women, he talks of the dreams of “the Asiatic” and “the African”—everyone is equal in their sleep;

Whitman’s manifestations of his era’s views of race have a strong answer in his own poetry. His celebration of races, genders, sexualities, classes, and so forth, place the excluded on a leveling social plane that was not politically realized for at least a generation after his death; in particular, racial identifications we think of as distinctively and wholly American were not considered American during Whitman’s lifetime. (Herrington 125)

Being “American”, to Whitman, begins with simply being here, inhabiting the land—we don’t have to earn it, but we should recognize our blessings and rejoice in them. We should be thankful for our setting and celebrate our ability to be thankful; we should celebrate just about everything about ourselves, the good and the bad, everything that makes us unique. Whitman shifts the focus from the nation to the individual—it is not the nation who will save the individual, but the individual who will save the nation.

Whitman, in a way, can actually be “blamed” for where we have come since Franklin and Emerson. He was the one who told us we are inherently holy, after all: “That you are here – that life exists, and identity, That the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse” (Whitman 228). And in another line he says, “What do you suppose I will intimate to you in a hundred ways, but that man or woman is

as good as God? And that there is no God any more divine than Yourself?" (Whitman 325)

These verses, and many like them strewn throughout the text of *Leaves of Grass* and other writings by Whitman, indicate Whitman's great hope for Americans—that we would recognize our own "potential" as Franklin and Emerson had wanted us to, but that we would also recognize our worth before we reached that potential, our worth in simply being and, specifically, in simply being American.

For the most part, Whitman lived a life that seemed to demonstrate him putting his "creed into his deed" as he was vocal about the importance of the poet and he made no secret of his desire to be *that* poet whom Emerson had called for in so many of his lectures. A printer himself, Whitman published his own first volume of *Leaves of Grass* and in one of his more famous episodes, he sent a copy to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson, of course, wrote a glowing letter of thanks, recognizing Whitman's genius. The fame of the letter, today, is not necessarily in its content, but in the controversy that followed Whitman's decision to print the letter in his next edition of *Leaves of Grass* without Emerson's permission. What is important to remember about Whitman's decision is to understand how fervently he felt about the need for America to hear his voice; the nation was divided and on the brink of the inevitable Civil War and Whitman believed his message was vital. M. Jimmie Killingsworth, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman*, reinforces this idea when discussing Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*,

Whitman could hardly think of poetics as separate from politics, so that the idea that a political economy could develop without a corresponding development in national poetry could only seem to him a serious problem of spiritual balance, even a perversion of human culture. (92)

However, during his lifetime, America, and particularly Whitman's critics, did not seem to share an enthusiasm for his work. Whether he was justified or not in his deep disappointment of the reception of *Leaves of Grass* seems to be beside the point. Emerson's encouraging words had assured Whitman that his poetry was as important as he imagined it would be. He went from abject failure to determined "messenger" in reading just a few lines from Emerson. He was back from the ashes and euphoric; his regained confidence coupled with his instinct to act without question caused him to make a bad call. However, Jerome Loving asserts that,

It is difficult even today to excuse Whitman for his actions, but a closer look at the circumstances may mitigate the offense. Whitman wanted the world to know what Ralph Waldo Emerson thought of his poetry; but he

also used the letter in self-defense, as a counterbalance to what considered a partially negative review (the very first review of his book) in the *Tribune* of 23 July 1855 [by Charles Dana]. (90)

Perhaps Whitman's use of Emerson's letter and the ensuing feud with Emerson over the liberties taken was not as bad a move as one might think. Whitman had long been influenced by Emerson, but those intellectuals who liked Emerson could easily, before this incident, discuss Emerson without giving thought to Whitman. Similarly, the "common people" who Whitman saw himself appealing to might enjoy his scandalous work without giving a consideration to Emerson. Whitman, of course, forces the conversation – even if "Emerson people" were talking about Whitman in disgust, they were still talking about him.

Scandal and disgust is where we again find commonalities between Whitman and Jesus in the analogy of the American Bible. Many zealous Christians draw a theological line in the sand with the assertion that either Jesus was the Savior, or he was the ultimate blasphemer, but he cannot simply be a 'good man' because his life and teachings do not allow for this kind of equivocal reading. It is a powerful statement that, at the very least, sparks interest in whether or not it is possible to "believe him without believing in him." The same, obviously to a lesser degree, can be asked about Walt Whitman. The current divide over Whitman seems to be a divide that has existed since *Leaves of Grass* was first published—he is either something of a working-class hack who used shock and sexuality to carve his way into literary history, or he is a groundbreaking poetic genius; we cannot believe the love and democracy preached in his verses unless we believe *in* him as a messenger of love and democracy—in truth, it is unlikely we would take the time to read him (outside of classroom assignments) if we didn't think he had a valid message to deliver. When there are such divides, it appears to be easier for enthusiasts and detractors to focus on areas of minor significance rather than the larger picture. With Jesus, this might come down to deciding whether he was "white" or "black" (likely, he was neither, being Jewish and all) or whether he fed 4000 or 5000 with fish and loaves. I do not deny that these debates have some importance, but they appear to be smoke screens in avoiding the larger debate. The big Whitman smokescreen seems to be whether or not he was gay.

In spite of what appears to be overwhelming evidence of Whitman's homosexuality, there continue to be debates over it and articles written on both sides. However, the debate completely detracts from Whitman's larger purpose as not just a "gay poet" but an American poet, perhaps the American poet. In their new book, *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman*, Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price do a fantastic job of using the debate over Whitman's homosexuality as a way of illuminating

his great project of writing the American Bible. Commenting on the sexual nature of the “Calumus” sequence of poems in *Leaves of Grass*, Folsom and Price say that,

It is striking that Whitman turned his attention to working out a language of male-male affection at precisely the historical moment that male-male violence was about to break out across the country, as the US moved inexorably toward civil war. What may seem at first an avoidance of the country’s divisive politics and a turn instead to personal concerns can in fact be viewed as Whitman’s powerful attempt to affirm the necessity of males caring for other males as a basis for successful democracy, as a foundation for a republic that perhaps too often inculcates in its youth the idea of fierce competition as its central value. (64)

Folsom and Price allude to the “competition” that seems to be in the American bloodstream—which in some ways can be attributed to Franklin’s teachings—in our competition with one another in domestic business—and with Emerson’s teachings—in our competition with other nations, particularly European nations, to dominate the intellectual and literary spheres. Whitman’s teachings seem to temper the call for success with a call for gratitude and enjoyment in what has already been succeeded. This is not to say that Whitman does not push towards an idealism, but that he seems to be much more conscious about how we get there; his predecessor are goal oriented and he is focused on the journey.

Do We Need an American Bible?

The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as I have had mine. I seek less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought – there to pursue your own flight.

-Walt Whitman, from *A Backward Glance*

America seems more bitterly divided by party lines than we have been in quite some time. We cannot decide whether we are a “conservative, Christian” nation or a “liberal, pan theological” one, whether or not conservative necessarily means Christian or liberal necessarily means non-Christian. We define ourselves with some demarcation and a hyphen before “American” – African-, Asian-, gay-, liberal-, etc. By revisiting men who knew us before we were a nation and when we were on the verge of losing our nation, we are reminded of the importance, even at the sacrifice of our individual agendas, of simply being American.

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