

Writing the Medicine

James Clarke celebrates the 200th anniversary of the birth of Walt Whitman

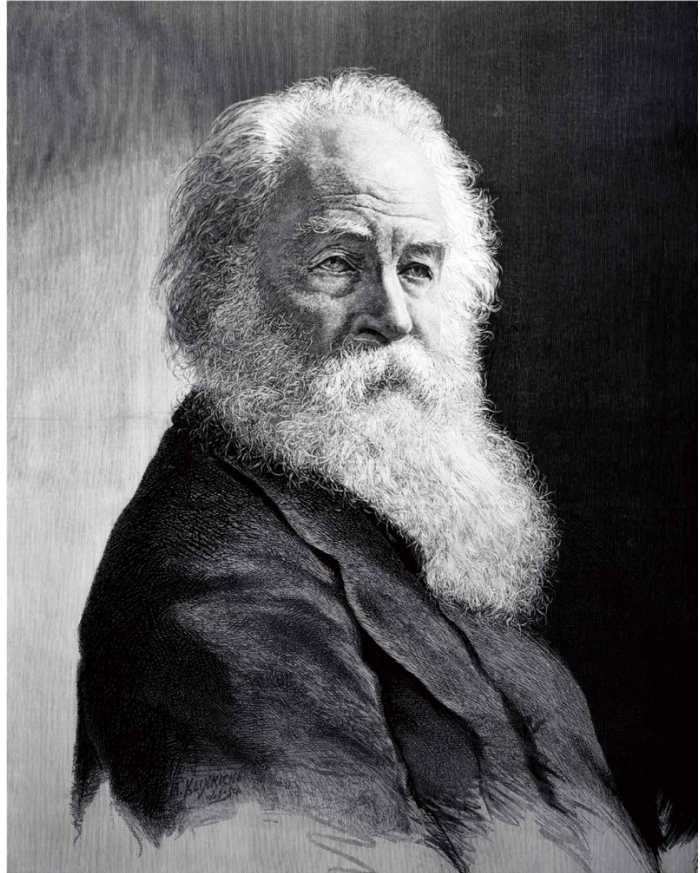
It doesn't seem so far out there to suggest that Walt Whitman would have embraced the idea and activity of the internet. He would have 'got it', immediately recognising how the online reality, at its very best, can yield a vista of democratising possibilities and a capacity to nurture connections. Indeed, maybe there's a wilderness to the online world, and Whitman would have recognised the hyperlink thrill of it all, reaching and weaving like the branches of a tree. If generosity is concerned with reaching out (and how potent that image is in this moment when so much seems to emphasise an isolationist sensibility!), then Whitman's writing and his own actions as a citizen offer us an encouraging example.

Whitman's deep commitment to an outward expression of his inner feeling characterises his writing, and in this year of the 200th anniversary of his birth there seems to still be very much a space for his ways of seeing.

A quick sketch of Whitman's life: he grew up on Long Island and worked in New York in the print trade and then as a journalist. He wrote poetry, too, but initially attention was modest. And then, in 1855, in his late thirties, Whitman published *Leaves of Grass* and appeared to suddenly arrive on the scene. In his book *The Gift*, Lewis Hyde describes how, at the age of 34, Whitman had experienced "a moment of 'cosmic consciousness'". It's this sensibility that informed so much of what Whitman would write, in both his poetry and his prose, from expansive mythic visions to various whimsical miniatures. Just look to 'Bumble-Bees' in *Specimen Days* for an example: "(Is there not ... some bumble-bee symphony?) How it all nourishes me, lulls me, in the way most needed."

This whimsicality is scattered across Whitman's work, and in his short prose piece 'The Lesson of a Tree' – Whitman's contemporary, and political hero, Abraham Lincoln also had an affinity for trees – he exults in the physical and temporal immensity of Nature. In doing so, Whitman invokes the spirit of Henry David Thoreau. Here he is, then, on the fascination that trees provoke: "What suggestions of imperturbability and *being*, as against the human trait of mere *seeming*." And then, "one does not wonder at the old story fables ... of people falling into love-sickness with trees."

Indeed, Whitman's expression of love-sickness is a feeling that suffuses a great deal of his writing, and his deep feeling for Lincoln informs one of his most



Woodcut illustration of Walt Whitman © H. Armstrong Roberts / Alamy Stock Images

recognised poems, 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd'. A sombre and epic poem that articulates Whitman's response to Lincoln's death, it registers various ideas around the profundities of both loss and delight and uses Nature imagery to get at these abstractions. In this respect, there's a fascinating conversation unfolding between Whitman's prose and his poetry. Just look at this statement from his prose piece *Specimen Days*: "After you have exhausted what there is in business, politics, conviviality, love, and so on – have found that none these finally satisfy, or permanently wear – what remains? Nature remains."

It is not only in his poetry that Whitman digs into Nature. His prose also provides a lens through which to view his delight in Nature as experience and metaphor for a specifically human experience. In the opening line of *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman announces that "the greatest lessons of Nature through the universe are perhaps the lessons of variety and freedom."