



## Mark Doty. What Is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life

Matt Miller

Yeshiva University, [matt.w.miller@gmail.com](mailto:matt.w.miller@gmail.com)

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## REVIEWS



MARK DOTY. *What Is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020. 278 pp.

IN *What Is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life*, Mark Doty explores his passionate engagement with the life, work, and ideas of the poet Doty regards as the most important influence on his own development. This is a familiar role for Whitman and one he has played for countless writers. However, the way Doty talks back to Whitman is distinctive in a number of ways: While many poets have cited Whitman as central to their creative growth, far fewer have claimed such a deeply personal influence as does Doty. Fewer still have described their personal and literary influences so as to be nearly indistinguishable. As a book-length biographical study, his book calls to mind another about Whitman written by a poet, Paul Zweig's influential *Walt Whitman: The Making of a Poet*, but with an important distinction: while Zweig's book is about how Whitman created himself, Doty's book is about how Whitman created Doty. What makes this unusual is that for Doty his mentor's poetry is rivaled or exceeded in importance by his influence's biography. Part diary of the spirit, part sexual bildungsroman, part critical reflection, as much as any book on Whitman I can recall, Doty's *What Is the Grass* takes to heart Whitman's famous claim, "whoever touches this book touches a man."

As a book-length study by a major American poet, Doty's book also calls to mind C. K. Williams' 2010 volume, *On Whitman*. Doty, like Williams, is fascinated by the erotic, bodily aspects of Whitman's poetry, but where Williams focuses on the musical qualities of Whitman's language, Doty is more interested in his personal and literary representation. Williams hears Whitman better than does Doty, and his attention to the music of Whitman's poetry is more revealing; however, Doty sees Whitman—sees him as a human being emerging from history—with far greater intensity of imagination and feeling. This personal retelling of Whitman's biography (Doty does not claim to offer fresh discoveries) is threaded through with autobiography, and the threads merge in ways that vary between the fascinating and the personally revelatory. As a guide to Whitman's life, Zweig is far superior, and as an analyzer of the poetry, I prefer

Williams, but I find Doty's prose to be more achingly alive than either of theirs, and I suspect this book will also find a wider public audience. For while it is flawed, it is seldom tedious. Ultimately, this book has perhaps less in common with either Zweig's or Williams's books than it does with Gary Schmidgall's odd, sexually focused, and equally candid study, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (1997). Both Schmidgall and Doty combine and at times even conflate literary biography with erotic memoir, but where Schmidgall mainly limits and contains his personal narratives to a single chapter, Doty continually weaves between the two modes. Another difference is that, while Schmidgall's prose is engaging and clear, Doty is a poet with a gorgeous prose style that can sustain chapters on its own merit.

One of Doty's poetic gifts is his capability for recording intoxicatingly precise observations. He has a good ear, but his eyes are better. At times in his poetry, I find Doty's descriptive capabilities to be undercut by a lack of drive, resulting in passages that are vivid but which cohere around predictable turns and trajectories. I find this to be less the case in Doty's prose, which strikes me as more formally experimental than his poetry. His prose is surprising in other ways as well. For a book labeled a biography, *What Is the Grass* is shockingly personal, nearly as much so as his heartbreaking memoir, *Heaven's Coast*. It is also structurally unconventional due to its fragmented form, constructed mainly of short sections that often only loosely pull together. Its generic nature too is unusual. Besides Schmidgall's, not many works combine personal narratives of sexual adventure and discovery with literary close reading and informal academic biography. *What Is the Grass* is almost as intensely personal as *Heaven's Coast*, and this too is unusual for a work that purports to mainly be about another author. On the dust jacket it is categorized as biography, but Doty is that rare poet whose prose is often more intimate than his poems.

Doty's eye for Whitman is both historical and literal. One of my favorite sections focuses on how Doty sees the famous photograph of Whitman known to scholars as his "Christ likeness." The phrase originates with Whitman's friend, Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, who used it to describe this quarter-plate daguerreotype and saw signs in it of Whitman's illumination, the "moment this carpenter too became seer . . . and he saw and knew the Spirit of God." Doty's interpretation is also infused with Christ-like spiritual elevation:

This face looks far beyond the minutes in which the picture was taken; it arrives in the present from a considerable distance. Its power to hold our attention rests in the eyes, which are clear and magnetic and look through us to something beyond the viewer. As I look from the eyes to the slight smile and then back to the eyes again, it seems the distance between the face

and the world is lit up by love. It's a look that pours out compassion, and if it betrays a certain weariness or impatience, that quality is softened by tenderness. (35)

This memorable and compelling description instantly impacted how I look at this image. However, Doty's interpretation, like Bucke's, is belied by what we actually know about the portrait. Here is Whitman's account, as told to Horace Traubel: "I was sauntering along the street: the day was hot. . . . A friend of mine . . . stood at the door of his place looking at the passers-by. He cried out to me at once: 'Old man!—old man!—come here: come right up stairs with me this minute' . . . 'Do come: come: I'm dying for something to do.' This picture was the result." Doty cites and surely used the same source most of us use for Whitman's portraits: the online *Walt Whitman Archive* gallery of photographs, where he would have found the quote just cited. Yet I find Doty's omission here to be not particularly troubling. His tone makes clear he is aware that many of his best passages romanticize and distort from what we know by historical records alone. Thoroughgoing historical fidelity is not Doty's goal.

As with Ginsberg, Doty's engagement with Whitman is literary, mystical, and definitively sexual, and some of Doty's accounts of Whitman's erotic inspiration make Ginsberg look restrained by comparison. In the book's sixth chapter, "The Unwriteable," Doty begins by describing his experiences at an invite-only private orgy where all the attendants wear masks. The image of masked men recalls for Doty the masks he once wore constantly in his private life, leading him to describe "the complex web of guilt and shame and misplaced loyalties that held [him]" to his unhappy marriage (84), the false poses he maintained with his ex-wife, and the affair that led to its unraveling. This recalls other affairs Doty has had, which he records with considerably more zest than his relations with his wife, until Doty is reminded of the death of one of his lovers, which lends a sobering quality to his ruminations, until he returns to the thought of the masked ball he once frequented, where he remembers having "taken on a volunteer-job, for one evening, in the clothes-check room, just for the sheer pleasure of helping the desiring, beautiful men out of their street identities and into their nakedness and then into their masks . . . to set the men at ease, to usher them into the deeper hours of the night" (87). The point is that Doty has in essence become Whitman—not through a literary influence so much as through erotic, personal inspiration.

For poets like Whitman, Ginsberg, and Doty, a complete embrace of life's erotic possibilities brings their intimate lives in touch with the mystical. As Doty correctly notes, Whitman "left no account" of the kind of unexplainable and

transcendent experiences upon which Doty's own writing depends, but as with his interpretation of "the Christ likeness" Doty is not disturbed by a lack of documented evidence. This is unsurprising, given that he himself has experienced events that he cannot explain through worldly knowledge and reason. Doty's erotic intimations of the mystical sometimes help him tie together passages that would otherwise seem incoherent. The most important and effective of these connections is the one Doty threads between his interpretation of the "the Christ likeness" and a liaison he describes between himself and a friend in New York City. After some sexual play in his friend's Upper West Side apartment, Doty describes an experience akin to Ginsberg's famous mystical encounter with Blake:

I would be hard pressed to describe any transition between what I saw first, which was my friend's grey-bearded, strongly sculptured face, and what, after a moment, replaced it. It wasn't Frank who looked at me then, but another man with short gray hair and beard, the same half-smile, but with the visionary dazzle of starlight in his eyes. I was, quite calmly, looking into the face of the Walt Whitman of 1856 [sic], the year of the Brooklyn daguerreotype, the picture in which he seems to be slowly and with a great inner radiance returning to earth from wherever it is he's been. (173-174)

Ignoring Doty's mistaken dating of this image, which Whitman established was created in the summer of 1854, this striking description aligns Doty with a tradition of American poets, including Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, and Alice Notley, who were similarly inspired by a spiritual encounter with a literary ancestor reborn. It's a description that has lingered in my mind.

Doty's mistaken dating in this passage, however, is not his only factual misstep. Describing Whitman's self-promotion, he claims Whitman "splashed a private letter from Emerson . . . on the back cover of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*" (190). In reality, he excerpted a single brief sentence and had it placed on the book's spine. Doty notes that in 1856 Whitman "had the barest handful of readers," when he was actually well known as a journalist and had a substantial, influential following among New York City's early bohemians (252). Doty claims "there are a troop of Whitman biographers and scholars . . . who will tell you Whitman was not queer" (177). That might have been true several decades ago, but today that claim rings false. None of Whitman's recent biographers deny that Whitman was queer, and in over twenty years of studying Whitman, attending countless conferences and symposiums, I have never encountered an individual who denied Whitman was attracted to men. Doty also imagines many events we have no evidence for, such as a conversation between Whitman

and Fanny Fern about his reviews, and he fails to cite the scholars he depends upon for many of his readings. His interpretation of the “boss tooth” passage in “The Sleepers,” for example, seems to have been lifted from *Collage of Myself: Walt Whitman and the Making of Leaves*.

*What Is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life* arrives at a time when Whitman’s reputation is again being reevaluated. While Whitman’s racist statements related to African Americans and racial integration in Reconstruction-era America have been known and discussed for decades, recently they have been given renewed life by readers encountering them for the first time. Such attention to Whitman is warranted both by the statements themselves and our country’s current moment of racial unrest. Doty’s book offers a valuable counterpoint to these reassessments, emphasizing a more positive aspect to Whitman’s legacy. For as limited as Whitman’s imagination was with respect to the historical reality of the multicultural integration celebrated in his poems, the poet has also played a crucial role in the liberation and affirmation of the lives of countless gay men like Doty. Doty touches on Whitman’s racial failings only briefly, but his powerful testimony to the way Whitman inspired him to discover and realize his truest self reminds us that our tallies of Whitman’s influence must account not only for how he failed in terms of race but for what he achieved in terms of sexual empowerment.

This book reads like a collection of fragments that only sometimes cohere, but in a sense this quality strengthens its connection to Whitman’s writing, which also proceeds by way of fragments and finds form via leaps and digressions. Where the formal mode of *Leaves of Grass*, especially the first edition, foregrounds this art of disjunction and confronts the reader with its refusal of coherence, Doty’s approach smooths things over at the edges and suggests a desire for coherence that is sometimes lacking. In *What Is the Grass* I do not feel that the pieces are held in hands as sturdy as Whitman’s. Doty, however, does have an elegant touch.

*Yeshiva University*

MATT MILLER

*Editor’s note: The text of this review has been edited since its original appearance to correct a misrepresentation on the part of the reviewer which this journal failed to catch before initial publication. Both the reviewer and the editors wish to apologize to Mr. Doty for this unfortunate error.*