

Slang in America

WALT WHITMAN

Walt Whitman (1819–1892) was born on Long Island in New York. He worked as a teacher, a printer, and a journalist before making his name as a poet. Known widely for his free verse as well as his democratic spirit, Whitman is one of the most influential poets in the English language. His major work is *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Among the famous poems from that collection are "Facing West from California's Shores," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," about Abraham Lincoln. Whitman's essay "Slang in America" was first published in 1885 in the *North American Review* and later collected in *November Boughs* (1888), a volume of Whitman's prose and poetry.

View'd freely, the English language is the accretion and growth of every dialect, race, and range of time, and is both the free and compacted composition of all. From this point of view, it stands for Language in the largest sense, and is really the greatest of studies. It involves so much; is indeed a sort of universal absorber, combiner, and conqueror. The scope of its etymologies is the scope not only of man and civilization, but the history of Nature in all departments, and of the organic Universe, brought up to date; for all are comprehended in words, and their backgrounds. This is when words become vitaliz'd, and stand for things, as they unerringly and soon come to do, in the mind that enters on their study with fitting spirit, grasp, and appreciation.

Slang, profoundly consider'd, is the lawless germinal element, below all words and sentences, and behind all poetry, and proves a certain perennial rankness and protestantism in speech. As the United States inherit by far their most precious possession—the language they talk and write—from the Old World, under and out of its feudal institutes, I will allow myself to borrow a simile even of those forms farthest removed from American Democracy. Considering Language then as some mighty potentate, into the majestic audience-hall of the monarch ever enters a personage like one of Shakespeare's clowns, and takes position there, and plays a part even in the stateliest ceremonies. Such is Slang, or indirection, an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism, and express itself illimitably, which in highest walks produces poets and poems, and doubles in pre-historic times gave the start to, and perfected, the whole immense tangle of the old mythologies. For, curious as it may appear, it is strictly the same impulse-source, the same thing. Slang, too, is the wholesome fermentation or eructation of those processes eternally active in language, by which froth and specks are

¹The act of belching. —Eds.