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The Good Gray Poet and the Quaker Oats Man: Speaker as Spokescharacter in Leaves of Grass

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Abstract

Looks at how Whitman "invested Leaves of Grass with a human identity" and "offered the act of reading the mass-produced book as a corrective to the social disintegration that mass production itself had helped bring about"; goes on to examine the book in the context of "early modern advertising," arguing that "communing with 'Walt Whitman,' drinking milk with Elsie the cow, and eating bologna that has a first and a last name are acts that spring partly from a common set of cultural circumstances" surrounding the early development of advertising, and proposing that Whitman's "immersion in the rapidly growing advertising industry was a key factor in his learning the importance and some of the methods of making a mass-produced commodity feel like a close friend"; concludes that "Whitman's iconoclastic mix of poetry and advertising epitomizes his struggle to reconcile his visions of proletarian utopia and industrial capitalism."

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