

WHITMAN ON "PERIPHRASTIC" LITERATURE

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SOME THIRTY YEARS AGO the great Whitman collector Charles Feinberg alerted me to a fascinating Whitman manuscript page (see facsimile on back cover),¹ and we had a lot of fun working out its implications. I finally wrote out my transcription of it, added a commentary for the literary journal *Fresco* (published at the University of Detroit where I was then teaching),² and then forgot about it as I went on to other Whitman matters and to a different campus. It might still be forgotten had not Sherry Southard included it in her valuable 1984 annotated bibliography, "Whitman and Language."³ Since *Fresco* no longer exists, a few scholars have written directly to me for offprints, which I can no longer supply for I have only one left. I had assumed the page would be included somewhere in William White's and Edward Grier's editions of Whitman's unpublished manuscripts,⁴ but it may have escaped their editorial purview because Charles Feinberg filed it with other Horace Traubel items. It is too interesting a document to be lost or forgotten, so I present here in somewhat shorter form my earlier speculations, in the hope that other Whitman scholars will investigate further its fascinating provenance.

The original sheet is an 8 x 12 inch white notepaper, lined in pencil by Whitman, and written (also in pencil) in the small neat hand similar to most of the manuscripts before his stroke. The page is torn from a notebook, the top lefthand corner lost in the process. There is a large footprint across the front, and the paper is badly soiled, indicating that it had been on the floor for some time. Thus it is possible that the sheet had been intentionally rejected and that it is no honor to the poet to recover it from the discard pile. On the other hand, Whitman was an almost incredible saver. Perhaps any poet would save the manuscripts, proof-sheets, and even galleys of his work, but Whitman saved everything of the remotest possible value to future investigators. Here is a transcription of the first page and a half, which forms—as I will attempt to demonstrate—a cohesive statement about "periphrastic" literature:

[]pel (god-spell) literally *good tidings*

[]ah, the divine presence, existing in form of a cloud, over

the marcy seat.

Sine, (lat.) without

[Jus, the east wind

¶ Snotty

[]will they put this load on us?—on the world?—on God?

[Jadishah, a title of the Sultan or the Shah

Geometry, involves the rules of lines, surfaces, and solids.

What is this sexless being? _____

latin, Anat.

This is no time to cut up carlacues.—

Frenulum, the string

The sweet sap trickles from the tree.

under the tongue

Periphery, the circumference of a circle

The Literature of ^{uttering numberless} is periphrastic ~~full of pretty~~ plays
upon genteel ideas,—ornamental enough, but its elegance
is ^{crowded with} like the elegance of parlors, ~~full of~~ china things
and bronze and gilt things, costly knickknacks piled
on curious shelves—the floor covered by a rich carpet.—

It is very circumlocutious, spreading perpetually out
toward the edges, of ^{avoiding} ~~—afraid of~~ abrupt points and
^{all unwashed births or} ~~new-born~~ facts, new ~~born,~~ naked and red—~~from the~~

afraid of the ~~bare~~ rough ground, and of the going
^{any way except concealed} bare-foot, or of entering the sea waves—~~naked~~
^{dressed in} ~~any-how but with~~ a complete bathing dress.—

Very What we call ^{—that absence of}
much of/ The modesty of modern literature is ~~unspeakably~~
^{is}
is its ~~negativeness, a million times more~~ more filthy

and rotten, than any positive blackguardism, ~~spoken~~
plain A writer speaking to
in words.—A ~~man writing for~~ select society dare not
^{he cannot refer mention} say that he takes it for granted that the ~~greatest and~~
^{traits} most beautiful, delicate and tender ~~facts~~ cosmopolitan

all copper-colored
to ~~each live white and black and brown~~ humanity
seeing decent
that is or ever was on earth, without ~~putting~~ folks
skate at once
to ~~flight~~ from his presence: he ~~cannot~~ must not

know he, as ~~like any other being was born~~ grew in the womb
honest ~~man~~ boy babe
of his mother and was born thence, like every ~~man~~

honest girl
and every ~~woman~~-babe; —he must not know that feeling
his her
of a man for a woman, and of a woman for a man, which

is originally clean and ~~sweet as the kisses of Christ and~~
transparent mythic bees —an originality
~~sweet as the honey of the hives of Eden, and which~~

men depart from in proportion as they are
only ~~the~~ unnatural and ~~the~~ ignorant, and the farther they
depart from it the more they lose the gist of the
very pleasure they seek. — ~~I consider the my supposition~~

True The literary modesty which ~~she~~ makes a studied
[page]

bend
~~circuits~~ outside of all such ~~then~~ subjects has
worse
scabs than the small pox, and a smell ~~like~~
multiplied to ~~origin~~
foetida in its tenth power.—Because its ~~heart~~ is sm

to supposed as a fact acknowledged / each one

that the speaker and all who listens to him, ~~have such~~
contains
~~within their breasts has each one~~ within his or her breast
bad and buried impulses
such a maggotty and putrid cispool of ~~polluted thoughts~~

as never to hear these simple facts mentioned without
then
~~attaching to them and sending thence~~ answering ~~thence~~ a with
maggoty
responses of a some carrion meanings or ~~stenchy~~ desires—

For myself I think of no more insulting supposition that

one could toward me than ~~anything of that~~ such

an one

Pelican

The first task was to determine the date of the page. For this, the two entries immediately before the *Periphery* definition are of major help. Both of them relate to lines in "Song of Myself" and are not used elsewhere in the successive permutations of *Leaves of Grass*. Thus *carlacue* is in Section 20, line 408—"I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue cut with a burnt stick at night"—and *sweet sap trickles*, with minor modification, is in Section 24, line 537—"Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you!"⁵ To these may be added the first entry, which is certainly *Gospel*, used in Section 43, line 1106—"Accepting the Gospels, accepting him that was crucified, knowing assuredly that he is divine"—and the second entry, which must be *Jehovah*, in Section 41, line 1028—"Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah."

Working these concordance clues for all possible information, I presume that the entry above *Geometry* is *Padishah*, which Whitman does not use but which might have been in his mind for Section 43, in which he places himself in the East or Near-East: "Drinking mead from the skull-cap, to Shastas and Vedas admirant, minding the Koran," etc. (1. 1104). One may even surmise that *Belus* (of Section 41, line 1030) is what was meant by the entry "[]us, the east wind." These conjectures, particularly these last two, mean little individually, but they add additional credence to the dating of this sheet as before the publication of the first edition in 1855. The other word entries, however, are much too enigmatic for scholarly sleuthing. The *Sine* would seem to be little more than a dictionary notation copied down to fix the definition in mind, and this would also apply to the *Frenulum* entry. The paragraph sign before the word *Snotty* is quite mysterious, although it may mean that Whitman had written the word in the nearest available blank space as a reminder to insert it somewhere (doubtless near the end) in the paragraph of castigation at refined literature.

The longer line entries that precede that paragraph do provide some clues to his association patterns. The definition of *Periphery* and the opening line below are too obvious to miss. The others are not so easy. My hunch is that some interrogative word (perhaps *How* or, better, *Why*) began the line of three questions, but whether those questions relate to the paragraph is anybody's guess. Mine is that they do, and that the *load* is the suffocating weight of prudery, hypocrisy, and fear that is imposed by the cultural conventions of Victorian America. The definition of *Geometry* has no connection that I can see with the scornful paragraph below, although (in association by opposites) geometry is pure and literature is not. The question *What is this sexless being?* means that the writer of "genteel ideas" is unmanly, ergo emasculated, and Whitman writes a paragraph to explain just what he means by that accusation.

Perhaps it makes little difference whether or not this page can be precisely dated, for the major item of interest, the little essay itself, is significant no matter what the decade. Still Whitman had too much sense to hunt up definitions of words after he had used them in his poetry and to make weak poetic lines out of expressive ones, so accordingly I date the page sometime before the first edition. I see the paragraph as an expression of revulsion at the sick prudery of his day and the recognition of an inner need to report life as he himself knew and/or hoped it would/should be. That the page relates to "Song of Myself" is not then accidental but altogether meaningful—is indeed in a certain sense its *modus vivendi*. But I am particularly anxious to fix the date of the page because Whitman went to such elaborate lengths to revise, amend, and improve his statement and then never—or almost never—used it.

That "almost never" must be inserted because of what turned up in the second stage of investigation, about which some explanation is necessary. *Leaves of Grass* was published in the first week of July, 1855. Whitman sent complimentary copies to the press and to well-known literary figures, but there was no immediate response. On July 23, however, Charles Dana wrote a favorable review in the *New York Tribune*, and within a day or so Whitman received the famous letter from Emerson. Except for these two early indications there is no other record that the book made any impact at all. Chronologically, the next periodical notice of *Leaves of Grass* is an anonymous article, "Walt Whitman and His Poems," in the *United States Review*. This is one of the three reviews of his poetry which Whitman himself wrote and had published anonymously in September, 1855. All three were reprinted in the book *In Re Walt Whitman*, put out by his literary executors in 1893.⁶

Whitman recognized the inevitable embarrassment the acknowledgement of his authorship of the review would entail and presumably permitted the justification that appears as the introductory note to the 1893 reprinting:

Whitman has remarked to us that in a period of misunderstanding and abuse [of *Leaves of Grass*] their [the laudatory reviews] publication seemed imperative. He consented before his death that they should here appear, as they have never elsewhere appeared, under his own name.—The Editors. (13)

The point is, of course, that there was no "misunderstanding and abuse," for there were only two comments, both favorable. Emerson's letter couldn't have been handsomer had Whitman written it himself, and even the harshest words in Dana's review were really complimentary:

His language is too frequently reckless and indecent, though this appears to arise from a naive unconsciousness rather than from an impure mind. His words might have passed between Adam and Eve in Paradise before the want of fig leaves brought no shame.⁷

Surely Whitman would not and could not complain of these notices, and it was the fact that there were *only* these notices that geared him into action for himself.

He was, of course, quite right in what he did about it, although there is not much more honesty in admitting the truth of such matters now than there was in Whitman's day. The fiction is a little more subtle, perhaps, but still the same. The author jokingly accepts the puff of his publisher's advertising, grimaces in false annoyance when someone reads to him the book jacket blurb, even publicly complains about the embarrassing exaggeration of his talent,—but he knows that we know that he condones and even contributes to the necessary build-up. I think the ambivalent role of the writer in relationship to the sale of his work is the most overlooked item in the examination of literature of the past two hundred years. Whitman's hero worshippers who edited *In Re* were a little abashed, and even today his biographers are foolishly put on the defensive for something that makes Whitman as modern as Joyce.

But to return to Whitman of late summer, 1855: Dana's review had appeared but was now forgotten, and it must have seemed to Whitman that *Leaves of Grass* might be forgotten as well. He had been prepared for attacks on its frankness, as the essay on periphrastic literature shows, but he was *not* prepared for silence. Since Emerson confirmed what he already knew to be true, that *Leaves of Grass* was "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has as yet contributed," there was little else (after leaking to the *Tribune* Emerson's letter) for him to do in terms of his program but to draw attention to the volume. So, in the *United States Review*, Whitman, in his role of anonymous commentator, hails "an American bard at last" who is "free and independent" of the "shamming" of "all our intellectual people." These "genteel persons" who "*touch not the earth barefoot, and enter not the sea except in a complete bathing dress,*" have hidden themselves from American life in their "*handsomely carpeted parlors*" with the "walls adorned" with "*china things, and nick-nacks*" (p. 13). Such fearful readers will recoil at "the style of these poems" which is "*just born and red,*" but this new poet will not be silenced:

Your stale modesties, he seems to say, are filthy to such a man as I. . . . The body, he teaches, is beautiful. Are you to be put down, he seems to ask, to that shallow level of literature and conversation that stops a man recognizing the delicious pleasures of his sex, or a woman hers? *Nature he proclaims inherently clean.*

The review goes on to make a number of shrewd observations, but I

quote only those that pertain and italicize those words and phrases that come from the "periphrastic literature" page.

The third stage of my investigation was the resolving of what seemed conflicting evidence. Weighed in terms of the word-list definitions, the page was written in the preparation period for *Leaves of Grass* in the early 1850s. But the page seems also a rejected draft of a review written sometime in August, 1855. The only way to resolve these seemed to be to combine them, for both are true. The connection stems from Whitman's inability to drop an idea once he had got it on paper. Writing—that is, actual composition—was a tremendously arduous task for him, as the painful revisions of this page testify. Mr. Feinberg used to show me scraps of paper which, if one counted the changes in pencil and ink, Whitman went over six or seven times, sometimes to the point of illegibility. Once he had worked over a line or sketched a paragraph, he always saved the end product hoping to find some use for it.

The history of the page seems to be that it was written in the early 1850s; retained up to the publication of the first edition, probably with the idea of including the paragraph in the now famous Preface to that edition; and kept after that to give the lie to the attacks he anticipated. When no attacks occurred, when indeed the challenge of his new poetry went unnoticed, he invited a critical battle by lifting what could be used and then put the page aside for future needs. Later on he may have mislaid the page but did not discard it, for the ideas were always in his mind, although never appearing in this fashion in any of his published work.

The brief essay itself is a model of restrained indignation, and to give it that air of sudden angry outburst Whitman works over his words and rhythms with sedulous care. The result can best be seen in a re-write of the edited copy so that its force and vigor will be apparent:

Literature is periphrastic, uttering numberless plays upon genteel ideas—ornamental enough, but its elegance is like the elegance of parlors crowded with china things, and bronze and gilt things, costly knick-knacks piled on curio shelves—the floor covered by a rich carpet. It is very circumlocutious, spreading perpetually out toward the edges—avoiding abrupt points and all unwashed facts, new births, naked or red—afraid of the rough ground, and going barefoot, or of entering the sea any way except dressed in a complete bathing dress. Very much of what we call the modesty of modern literature is more rotten than any positive blackguardism in plain words. A writer speaking to select society takes it for granted that he cannot mention the most beautiful, delicate, and tender traits cosmopolitan to all white, black, and copper-colored humanity that is or ever was on earth, without seeing decent folks skate at once from his presence: he must not know he grew in the womb of his mother and was born thence, like every honest boy-babe and every honest girl-babe; he must not know that feeling of a man for his woman, and of a woman for her man, which is originally clean and transparent as the mythic honey of the bees of Eden—an originality which men depart from in proportion as they are unnatural and ignorant, and the farther they depart from it the more they lose the gist of the very pleasure

they seek. The modesty which makes a studied bend outside of all such subjects has [more] scabs than the small pox, and a smell worse [than asa]foetida multiplied to its tenth power. Because it is supposed as a fact acknowledged that the speaker and each one who listens to him contains within his or her breast such a cesspool of bad impulses as never to hear these simple facts mentioned without answering them with responses of some carrion meanings or maggoty desires. For myself, I think of no more insulting supposition that one could [make] toward me than such an one. [I stand on my conviction that] true modesty ignores nothing in the world—it rather takes for granted that everything is, in itself, beautiful and pure and benevolent.

Although these are Whitman's final words on the subject, I am grateful that the first words, the crossed out words, are still readable. Opinions will vary on which of the original words should have been left in, and everyone will wonder what more Whitman would have added had he finally brought the essay to publication. What we have, however, contributes significantly to our knowledge of Whitman.

First, there is the clear deduction that he thought and felt intensely about modesty in his writing. Second, it is now evident that he was acutely sensitive to moralistic criticism, which he could only see as unhealthy and perverse. Third, it seems inescapable that in rejecting the hidden Manicheism of his culture he was more completely and consciously a romantic naturalist than his prefaces and poems (and his critics) have revealed. If the troubled state of our world, and if the doubly-troubled state of our sex-knowledge, has made his review remote, innocent, and naive, it is nevertheless impossible not to realize the sincerity, conviction, and near passion with which he speaks of the holiness of love. If the doctrine of original sin seems confirmed these days by assorted sciences from anthropology to psychology to sociology, it is still great to be reminded that the glass we see through darkly was crystal clear to Whitman.

The page concludes with a strange assortment of notes, typical of many other sheets I have examined, and indeed typical of Whitman himself:

True modesty ignores nothing in the world—it rather takes for granted that every thing is, in itself, beautiful and pure and benevolent.

"Let him who is without a taper be assassinated," this [illeg.] this half-joking half-earnest cry during the "extinguishment" hour of the last night of the carnival at Rome, when every body swarmed through the Corso, and public places, with tapers—each individual trying to preserve his own light and put out whosoever else's he could. This performance altogether is called "*extinguishing* the carnival."

Discord in dress: Travellers through Germany have told me of Jews at the great fairs, with / dressed

At the great fairs in Germany travellers [illeg.] tell me
they meet Jews dressed in flowing garments, with patri-
archal beards—all surmounted on the head by
the modern fashionable hat

Iambus—*Iambic*—Pope's *The Illiad* is in iambuses—long and short
syllables alternately—"The sire—of gods—the aw-ful si-lence breaks."

Iambics—the old satirical poems—festive toward Dionysus or Bacchus
—out of [illeg.] which comedy grew—

Aristophanes
contemporary of Socrates
440 B.C.

It is sometimes forgotten that Whitman was almost entirely self-educated, more so than any other major poet since Shakespeare. That self-education has always had peculiar advantages and has sometimes led to spectacular triumphs is obvious enough, and Whitman enthusiasts have been sufficiently laudatory in claiming both for him. But no one is self-educated, *ab initio*, on purpose. No one cherishes the inevitable blunders and misdirections consequent upon an innocent approach. And certainly no one with the native ingenuity of a mid-nineteenth-century American retains his amateur status very long. In the unpublished manuscript material now gathered through those amazing White and Grier volumes, Whitman reveals himself as a shrewd, intuitive, and eclectic note-taker. He jots down everything and files for future reference a wonderful variety of scattered information: slang, place names, French words, trade terms, and frequently odd items such as conclude this page. Of course, there are always the puzzling, seemingly cryptic entries (why *Pelican* at the end of the essay?), but without them literary detective work would be work only.

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NOTES

1 The manuscript, "Literature is Periphrastic," is stored in container 32 of the Feinberg Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Scholars using the LC microfilm of the Feinberg Collection should be aware that, because of carelessness in filming, only the recto of this manuscript page appears on the microfilm.

2 C. Carroll Hollis, "Whitman on 'Periphrastic' Literature . . . Speculations on an Unpublished MS. Fragment," *Fresco* 10 (Winter/Spring 1960), 5-13.

3 *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 2 (Fall 1984), 31-49.

4 *Daybooks and Notebooks*, 3 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1978); *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 6 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

5 All quotations of Whitman's poetry are from Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., *Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader's Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 1965).

6 Horace L. Traubel, Richard Maurice Bucke, Thomas B. Harned, eds., *In Re Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1893), 13-32.

7 Charles Dana, Review of *Leaves*, *New York Daily Tribune* (July 23, 1855), 2-3.